

# **THIS BRIDGE CALLED MY BACK**

## **WRITINGS BY RADICAL WOMEN OF COLOR**



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**FOREWORD:**

**TONI CADE BAMBARA**

**P E R S E P H O N E   P R E S S**

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**Watertown, Massachusetts**



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"billie lives! billie lives!" © 1980 by hattie gossett. "who told you anybody wants to hear from you? you ain't nothing but a black woman!" © 1980 by hattie gossett. "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" © 1980 by Audre Lorde. "An Open Letter to Mary Daly" © 1980 by Audre Lorde. "Revolution: It's Not Neat or Pretty or Quick" © 1980 by Pat Parker. "The Bridge Poem" © 1981 by Donna K. Rushin.

para

Elvira Moraga Lawrence y  
Amalia García Anzaldúa  
y para todas nuestras madres  
por la obediencia y  
la insurrección  
que ellas nos enseñaron.

for

Elvira Moraga Lawrence and  
Amalia García Anzaldúa  
and for all our mothers  
for the obedience and rebellion  
they taught us.

## Foreword

How I cherish this collection of cables, esoesses, conjurations and fusile missles. Its motive force. Its gathering-us-in-ness. Its midwifery of mutually wise understandings. Its promise of autonomy and community. And its pledge of an abundant life for us all. On time. That is to say – overdue, given the times. ("Arrogance rising, moon in oppression, sun in destruction" – *Cameron*.)

Blackfoot amiga Nisei hermana Down Home Up Souf Sistuh  
 sister El Barrio suburbia Korean The Bronx Lakota Menominee  
 Cubana Chinese Puertoriqueña reservation Chicana campañera  
 and letters testimonials poems interviews essays journal  
 entries sharing Sisters of the yam Sisters of the rice Sisters  
 of the corn Sisters of the plantain putting in telecalls to each other.  
 And we're all on the line.

Now that we've begun to break the silence and begun to break through the diabolically erected barriers and can hear each other and see each other, we can sit down with trust and break bread together. Rise up and break our chains as well. For though the initial motive of several siter/riters here may have been to protest, complain or explain to white feminist would-be allies that there are other ties and visions that bind, prior allegiances and priorities that supercede their invitations to coalesce on their terms ("Assimilation within a solely western-european herstory is not acceptable" – *Lorde*), the process of examining that would-be alliance awakens us to new tasks ("We have a lot more to concentrate on beside the pathology of white wimmin" – *davenport*)

and a new connection:	US
a new set of recognitions:	US
a new site of accountability:	US
a new source of power:	US

And the possibilities intuited here or alluded to there or called forth in various pieces in flat out talking in tongues – the possibility of several million women refuting the numbers game inherent in "minority," the possibility of denouncing the insulated/orchestrated conflict game of divide and conquer – through the fashioning of potent networks of all the daughters of the ancient mother cultures is awesome, mighty, a glorious life work. This Bridge lays down the planks to cross over on to a new place where stooped labor cramped quartered down pressed

and caged up combatants can straighten the spine and expand the lungs and make the vision manifest ("The dream is real, my friends. The failure to realize it is the only unreality." – Street Preacher in *The Salt Eaters*).

This Bridge documents particular rites of passage. Coming of age and coming to terms with community – race, group, class, gender, self – its expectations, supports, and lessons. And coming to grips with its perversions – racism, prejudice, elitism, misogyny, homophobia, and murder. And coming to terms with the incorporation of disease, struggling to overthrow the internal colonial/pro-racist loyalties – color/hue/hair caste within the household, power perversities engaged in under the guise of "personal relationships," accommodation to and collaboration with self-ambush and amnesia and murder. And coming to grips with those false awakenings too that give us ease as we substitute a militant mouth for a radical politic, delaying our true coming of age as committed, competent, principled combatants.

There is more than a hint in these pages that too many of us still equate tone with substance, a hot eye with clear vision, and congratulate ourselves for our political maturity. For of course it takes more than pique to unite our wrath ("the capacity of heat to change the shape of things" – *Moraga*) and to wrest power from those who have it and abuse it, to reclaim our ancient powers lying dormant with neglect ("i wanna ask billie to teach us how to use our voices like she used hers on that old 78 record" – *gossett*), and create new powers in arenas where they never before existed. And of course it takes more than the self-disclosure and the bold glimpse of each others' life documents to make the grand resolve to fearlessly work toward potent meshings. Takes more than a rinsed lens to face unblinkingly the particular twists of the divide and conquer tactics of this moment: the practice of withdrawing small business loans from the Puerto Rican grocer in favor of the South Korean wig shop, of stripping from Black students the Martin Luther King scholarship fund fought for and delivering those funds up to South Vietnamese or white Cubans or any other group the government has made a commitment to in its greedy grab for empire. We have got to know each other better and teach each other our ways, our views, if we're to remove the scales ("seeing radical differences where they don't exist and not seeing them when they are critical" – *Quintanales*) and get the work done.

This Bridge can get us there. Can coax us into the habit of listening to each other and learning each other's ways of seeing and being. Of hearing each other as we heard each other in Pat Lee's *Freshtones*, as we heard each other in Pat Jones and Faye Chiang, et. al.'s *Ordinary*

Women, as we heard each other in Fran Beale's *Third World Women's Alliance* newspaper. As we heard each other over the years in snatched time moments in hallways and conference corridors, caucusing between sets. As we heard each other in those split second interfacings of yours and mine and hers student union meetings. As we heard each other in that rainbow attempt under the auspices of IFCO years ago. And way before that when Chinese, Mexican, and African women in this country saluted each other's attempts to form protective leagues. And before that when New Orleans African women and Yamassee and Yamacrow women went into the swamps to meet with Filipino wives of "draftees" and "defectors" during the so called French and Indian War. And when members of the maroon communities and women of the long lodge held council together while the Seminole Wars raged. And way way before that, before the breaking of the land mass when we mothers of the yam, of the rice, of the maize, of the plantain sat together in a circle, staring into the camp fire, the answers in our laps, knowing how to focus...

Quite frankly, This Bridge needs no Foreword. It is the Afterward that'll count. The coalitions of women determined to be a danger to our enemies, as June Jordan would put it. The will to be dangerous ("ask billie so we can learn how to have those bigtime bigdaddies jumping outta windows and otherwise offing theyselves in droves" —gossett). And the contracts we creative combatants will make to mutually care and cure each other into wholesomeness. And the blue-prints we will draw up of the new order we will make manifest. And the personal unction we will discover in the mirror, in the dreams, or on the path across This Bridge. The work: To make revolution irresistible.

Blessings,

Toni Cade Bambara

Novelist Bambara and interviewer Kalamu Ya Salaam were discussing a call she made in *The Salt Eaters* through The Seven Sisters, a multi-cultural, multi-media arts troupe, a call to unite our wrath, our vision, our powers.

Kalamu: Do you think that fiction is the most effective way to do this?

Toni: No. The most effective way to do it, is *to do it!*\*

\*\*"In Search of the Mother Tongue: An Interview with Toni Cade Bambara" (*First World Journal*, Fall, 1980).

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# Preface

Change does not occur in a vacuum. In this preface I have tried to re-create for you my own journey of struggle, growing consciousness, and subsequent politicization and vision as a woman of color. I want to reflect in actual terms how this anthology and the women in it and around it have personally transformed my life, sometimes rather painfully but always with richness and meaning.

## I Transfer and Go Underground

(Boston, Massachusetts – July 20, 1980)

It is probably crucial to describe here the way this book is coming together, the journey it is taking me on. The book still not completed and I have traveled East to find it a publisher. Such an anthology is in high demands these days. A book by radical women of color. The Left needs it, with its shaky and shabby record of commitment to women, period. Oh, yes, it can claim its attention to "color" issues, embodied in the male. Sexism is acceptable to the white left publishing house, particularly if spouted through the mouth of a Black man.

The feminist movement needs the book, too. But for different reasons. Do I dare speak of the boredom setting in among the white sector of the feminist movement? What was once a cutting edge, growing dull in the too easy solution to our problems of hunger of soul and stomach. The lesbian separatist utopia? No thank you, sisters. I can't prepare myself a revolutionary packet that makes no sense when I leave the white suburbs of Watertown, Massachusetts and take the T-line to Black Roxbury.

Take Boston alone, I think to myself and the feminism my so-called sisters have constructed does nothing to help me make the trip from one end of town to another. Leaving Watertown, I board a bus and ride it quietly in my light flesh to Harvard Square, protected by the gold highlights my hair dares to take on, like an insult, in this miserable heat.

*I transfer and go underground.*

Julie told me the other day how they stopped her for walking through the suburbs. Can't tell if she's a man or a woman, only know that it's Black moving through that part of town. They wouldn't spot her here, moving underground.

The train is abruptly stopped. A white man in jeans and tee shirt breaks into the car I'm in, throws a Black kid up against the door, handcuffs him and carries him away. The train moves on. The day before, a 14-year-old Black boy was shot in the head by a white cop. And, the summer is getting hotter.

I hear there are some women in this town plotting a *lesbian* revolution. What does this mean about the boy shot in the head is what I want to know. I am a lesbian. I want a movement that helps me make some sense of the trip from Watertown to Roxbury, from white to Black. I love women the entire way, beyond a doubt.

Arriving in Roxbury, arriving at Barbara's\*....By the end of the evening of our first visit together, Barbara comes into the front room where she has made a bed for me. She kisses me. Then grabbing my shoulders she says, very solid-like, "we're sisters." I nod, put myself into bed, and roll around with this word, *sisters*, for two hours before sleep takes on. I earned this with Barbara. It is not a given between us – Chicana and Black – to come to see each other as sisters. This is not a given. I keep wanting to repeat over and over and over again, the pain and shock of difference, the joy of commonness, the exhilaration of meeting through incredible odds against it.

But the passage is *through*, not over, not by, not around, but through. This book, as long as I see it for myself as a passage through, I hope will function for others, colored\*\* or white, in the same way. How do we develop a movement that can live with the fact of the loves and lives of these women in this book?

I would grow despairing if I believed, as Rosario Morales refutes, we were unilaterally defined by color and class. Lesbianism is then a hoax, a fraud. I have no business with it. Lesbianism is supposed to be about connection.

What drew me to politics was my love of women, the agony I felt in observing the straight-jackets of poverty and repression I saw people in my own family in. But the deepest political tragedy I have experienced is how with such grace, such blind faith, this commitment to women in the feminist movement grew to be exclusive and reactionary. *I call my white sisters on this.*

I have had enough of this. And, I am involved in this book because more than anything else I need to feel enlivened again in a movement

\* I want to acknowledge and thank Barbara Smith for her support as a sister, her insights as a political activist and visionary, and especially for her way with words in helping me pull this together.

\*\*Throughout the text, the word "colored" will be used by the editors in referring to all Third World peoples and people of color unless otherwise specified.

that can, as my friend Amber Holligaugh states, finally ask the right questions and admit to not having all the answers.

## **A Bridge Gets Walked Over**

*(Boston, Massachusetts – July 25, 1980)*

I am ready to go home now. I am ready. Very tired. Couldn't sleep all night. Missing home. There is a deep fatigue in my body this morning. I feel used up. Adrienne asks me if I can write of what has happened with me while here in Boston. She asks me if I *can*, not *would*. I say, yes, I think so. And now I doubt it. The pain of racism, classism. Such overused and trivialized words. The pain of it all. I do not feel people of color are the only ones hurt by racism.

Another meeting. Again walking into a room filled with white women, a splattering of women of color around the room. The issue on the table, Racism. The dread and terror in the room lay like a thick immovable paste above all our shoulders, white and colored, alike. We, Third World women in the room, thinking back to square one, again.

*How can we – this time – not use our bodies to be thrown over a river of tormented history to bridge the gap?* Barbara says last night: "A bridge gets walked over." Yes, over and over and over again.

I watch the white women shrink before my eyes, losing their fluidity of argument, of confidence, pause awkwardly at the word, "race", the word, "color." The pauses keeping the voices breathless, the bodies taut, erect – unable to breathe deeply, to laugh, to moan in despair, to cry in regret. I cannot continue to use my body to be walked over to make a connection. Feeling every joint in my body tense this morning, used.

What the hell am I getting myself into? Gloria's voice has recurred to me throughout this trip. A year and a half ago, she warned and encouraged: "This book will change your life, Cherrie. It will change both our lives." And it has. Gloria, I wish you were here.

A few days ago, an old friend said to me how when she first met me, I seemed so white to her. I said in honesty, I used to feel more white. You know, I really did. But at the meeting last night, dealing with white women here on this trip, I have felt so very dark: dark with anger, with silence, with the feeling of being walked over.

I wrote in my journal: "My growing consciousness as a woman of color is surely seeming to transform my experience. How could it be that the more I feel with other women of color, the more I feel myself Chicana, the more susceptible I am to racist attack!"

## A Place of Breakthrough: Coming Home (San Francisco, California – September 20, 1980)

When Audre Lorde, speaking of racism, states: "I urge each one of us to reach down into that deep place of knowledge inside herself and touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives there."<sup>\*</sup> I am driven to do so because of the passion for women that lives in my body. I know now that the major obstacle for me, personally, in completing this book has occurred when I stopped writing it for myself, when I looked away from my own source of knowledge.

Audre is right. It is also the source of terror – how deeply separation between women hurts me. How discovering difference, profound differences between myself and women I love has sometimes rendered me helpless and immobilized.

I think of my sister here. How I still haven't gotten over the shock that she would marry this white man, rather than enter onto the journey I knew I was taking. (This is the model we have from my mother, nurturing/waiting on my father and brother all the days of her life. Always how if a man walked into the room, he was paid attention to [indulged] in a particular Latin-woman-to-man way.) For years, and to this day, I am still recovering from the disappointment that this girl/this sister who had been with me everyday of my life growing up – who slept, ate, talked, cried, worked, fought with me – was suddenly lost to me through this man and marriage. I still struggle with believing I have a right to my feelings, that it is not "immature" or "queer" to refuse such separations, to still mourn over this early abandonment, "this homesickness for a woman."<sup>\*\*</sup> So few people really understand how deep the bond between sisters can run. I was raised to rely on my sister, to believe sisters could be counted on "to go the long hard way with you."

Sometimes for me "that deep place of knowledge" Audre refers to seems like an endless reservoir of pain, where I must continually unravel the damage done to me. It is a calculated system of damage, intended to ensure our separation from other women, but particularly those we learned to see as most different from ourselves and therefore, most fearful. The women whose pain we do not want to see as our own. Call it racism, class oppression, men, or dyke-baiting, the system thrives.

<sup>\*</sup>From "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master's House" (from the text).

<sup>\*\*</sup>Adrienne Rich "Trancendental Etude," *The Dream of a Common Language* (New York: Norton, 1978), p. 75.

I mourn the friends and lovers I have lost to this damage. I mourn the women whom I have betrayed with my own ignorance, my own fear.

The year has been one of such deep damage. I have felt between my hands the failure to bring a love I believed in back to life. Yes, the failure between lovers, sisters, mother and daughter – the betrayal. How have we turned our backs on each other – the bridge collapsing – whether it be for public power, personal gain, private validation, or more closely, to save face, to save our children, to save our skins.

"See whose face it wears,"\* Audre says. And I know I must open my eyes and mouth and hands to name the color and texture of my fear.

I had nearly forgotten why I was so driven to work on this anthology. I had nearly forgotten that I wanted/needed to deal with racism because I couldn't stand being separated from other women. Because I took my lesbianism that seriously. I first felt this the most acutely with Black women – Black dykes – who I felt ignored me, wrote me off because I looked white. And yet, the truth was that I didn't know Black women intimately (Barbara says "it's about who you can sit down to a meal with, who you can cry with, whose face you can touch"). I had such strong "colored hunches" about our potential connection, but was basically removed from the lives of most Black women. The ignorance. The painful, painful ignorance.

I had even ignored my own bloodline connection with Chicanas and other Latinas. Maybe it was too close to look at, too close to home. Months ago in a journal entry I wrote: "I am afraid to get near to how deeply I want the love of other Latin women in my life." In a real visceral way I hadn't felt the absence (only assumed the fibers of a'ienation I so often felt with anglo women as normative). Then for the first time, speaking on a panel about racism here in San Francisco, I could physically touch what I had been missing. There in the front row, nodding encouragement and identification, sat five Latina sisters. Count them! Five avowed Latina Feminists: Gloria, Jo, Aurora, Chabela y Mirtha. For once in my life every part of me was allowed to be visible and spoken for in one room at one time.

After the forum, the six of us walk down Valencia Street singing songs in Spanish. We buy burritos y cerveza from "La Cumbre" and talk our heads off into the night, crying from the impact of such a reunion.

*Sí, son mis comadres.* Something my mother had with her women friends and sisters. Coming home. For once, I didn't have to choose

\*From "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master's House" (from the text).

between being a lesbian and being Chicana; between being a feminist and having family.

## I Have Dreamed of a Bridge

*(San Francisco, California – September 25, 1980)*

Literally, for two years now, I have dreamed of a bridge. In writing this conclusion, I fight the myriad voices that live inside me. The voices that stop my pen at every turn of the page. They are the voices that tell me here I should be talking more "materialistically" about the oppression of women of color, that I should be plotting out a "strategy" for Third World Revolution. But what I really want to write about is faith. That without faith, I'd dare not expose myself to the potential betrayal, rejection, and failure that lives throughout the first and last gesture of connection.

And yet, so often I have lost touch with the simple faith I know in my blood. My mother. On some very basic level, the woman cannot be shaken from the ground on which she walks. Once at a very critical point in my work on this book, where everything I loved – the people, the writing, the city – all began to cave in on me, feeling such utter despair and self-doubt, I received in the mail a card from my mother. A holy card of St. Anthony de Padua, her patron saint, her "special" saint, wrapped in a plastic cover. She wrote in it: "Dear Cherrie, I am sending you this prayer of St. Anthony. Pray to God to help you with this book." And a cry came up from inside me that I had been sitting on for months, cleaning me out – a faith healer. Her faith in this saint did actually once save her life. That day, it helped me continue the labor of this book.

I am not talking here about some lazy faith, where we resign ourselves to the tragic splittings in our lives with an upward turn of the hands or a vicious beating of our breasts. I am talking about believing that we have the power to actually transform our experience, change our lives, save our lives. Otherwise, why this book? It is the faith of activists I am talking about.

The materialism in this book lives in the flesh of these women's lives: the exhaustion we feel in our bones at the end of the day, the fire we feel in our hearts when we are insulted, the knife we feel in our backs when we are betrayed, the nausea we feel in our bellies when we are afraid, even the hunger we feel between our hips when we long to be touched.

Our strategy is how we cope – how we measure and weigh what is to be said and when, what is to be done and how, and to whom and to

whom and to whom, daily deciding/risking who it is we can call an ally, call a friend (whatever that person's skin, sex, or sexuality). We are women without a line. We are women who contradict each other.

This book is written for all the women in it and all whose lives our lives will touch. We are a family who first only knew each other in our dreams, who have come together on these pages to make faith a reality and to bring all of our selves to bear down hard on that reality.

It is about physical and psychic struggle. It is about intimacy, a desire for life between all of us, not settling for less than freedom even in the most private aspects of our lives. A total vision.

For the women in this book, I will lay my body down for that vision.  
*This Bridge Called My Back.*

In the dream, I am always met at the river.

Cherrie Moraga



# The Bridge Poem

## *Donna Kate Rushin*

I've had enough  
I'm sick of seeing and touching  
Both sides of things  
Sick of being the damn bridge for everybody

Nobody  
Can talk to anybody  
Without me  
Right?

I explain my mother to my father my father to my little sister  
My little sister to my brother my brother to the white feminists  
The white feminists to the Black church folks the Black church folks  
To the ex-hippies the ex-hippies to the Black separatists the  
Black separatists to the artists the artists to my friends' parents . . .

Then  
I've got to explain myself  
To everybody

I do more translating  
Than the Gawdamn U.N.

Forget it  
I'm sick of it

I'm sick of filling in your gaps

Sick of being your insurance against  
The isolation of your self-imposed limitations  
Sick of being the crazy at your holiday dinners  
Sick of being the odd one at your Sunday Brunches  
Sick of being the sole Black friend to 34 individual white people

Find another connection to the rest of the world  
Find something else to make you legitimate  
Find some other way to be political and hip

I will not be the bridge to your womanhood  
Your manhood  
Your human-ness

I'm sick of reminding you not to  
Close off too tight for too long

I'm sick of mediating with your worst self  
On behalf of your better selves

I am sick  
Of having to remind you  
To breathe  
Before you suffocate  
Your own fool self

Forget it  
Stretch or drown  
Evolve or die

The bridge I must be  
Is the bridge to my own power  
I must translate  
My own fears  
Mediate  
My own weaknesses

I must be the bridge to nowhere  
But my true self  
And then  
I will be useful

# Introduction

## How It All Began

In February of 1979, Gloria attended a women's retreat in the country just north of San Francisco. At Merlin Stone's insistence, three Third World women were to receive scholarships to her workshop on goddesses and heroines taking place during the retreat. Only one made it – Gloria. The management and some of the staff made her feel an outsider, the poor relative, the token woman of color. And all because she was not white nor had she paid the \$150 fee the retreat organizers had set for the workshop. The seed that germinated into this anthology began there in Gloria's talks with Merlin.

What had happened at the women's retreat was not new to our experience. Both of us had first met each other working as the only two Chicanas in a national feminist writers organization. After two years of involvement with the group which repeatedly refused to address itself to its elitist and racist practices, we left the organization and began work on this book.

In April, 1979, we wrote:

We want to express to all women – especially to white middle-class women – the experiences which divide us as feminists; we want to examine incidents of intolerance, prejudice and denial of differences within the feminist movement. We intend to explore the causes and sources of, and solutions to these divisions. We want to create a definition that expands what "feminist" means to us.

(From the original soliciting letter)

## The Living Entity

What began as a reaction to the racism of white feminists soon became a positive affirmation of the commitment of women of color to our own feminism. Mere words on a page began to transform themselves into a living entity in our guts. Now, over a year later, feeling greater solidarity with other feminists of color across the country through the making of this book, we assert:

*This Bridge Called My Back* intends to reflect an uncompromised definition of feminism by women of color in the U.S.

We named this anthology "radical" for we were interested in the writings of women of color who want nothing short of a revolution in

the hands of women – who agree that that is the goal, no matter how we might disagree about the getting there or the possibility of seeing it in our own lifetimes. We use the term in its original form – stemming from the word “root” – for our feminist politic emerges from the roots of both of our cultural oppression and heritage.

## The Parts of the Whole

The six sections of *This Bridge Called My Back* intend to reflect what we feel to be the major areas of concern for Third World women in the U.S. in forming a broad-based political movement: 1) how visibility/invisibility as women of color forms our radicalism; 2) the ways in which Third World women derive a feminist political theory specifically from our racial/cultural background and experience; 3) the destructive and demoralizing effects of racism in the women's movement; 4) the cultural, class, and sexuality differences that divide women of color; 5) Third World women's writing as a tool for self-preservation and revolution; and 6) the ways and means of a Third World feminist future.

## The Writers and Their Work

The women in whose hands *This Bridge Called My Back* was wrought identify as Third World women and/or women of color. Each woman considers herself a feminist, but draws her feminism from the culture in which she grew. Most of the women appearing in this book are first-generation writers. Some of us do not see ourselves as writers, but pull the pen across the page anyway or speak with the power of poets.

The selections in this anthology range from extemporaneous stream of consciousness journal entries to well thought-out theoretical statements; from intimate letters to friends to full-scale public addresses. In addition, the book includes poems and transcripts, personal conversations and interviews. The works combined reflect a diversity of perspectives, linguistic styles, and cultural tongues.

In editing the anthology, our primary commitment was to retaining this diversity, as well as each writer's especial voice and style. The book is intended to reflect our color loud and clear, not tone it down. As editors we sought out and believe we found, non-rhetorical, highly personal chronicles that present a political analysis in everyday terms.

In compiling the anthology, Cherrie was primarily responsible for the thematic structure and organization of the book as a whole. She also wrote the introductions to the first four sections of the book which cover 1) *The Roots of Our Radicalism*; 2) *Theory in the Flesh*; 3) *Racism in the Women's Movement*; and 4) *On Culture, Class, and Homophobia*.

Gloria wrote the introductions to the final two sections of the book which explore *The Third World Woman Writer* and *The Vision* of the Third World feminist. Together as editors, we both bore the burden of the book (even more than we had anticipated – this being our first attempt at such a project), not only doing the proof-reading and making editorial decisions, but also acting as a telephone answering and courier service, PR persons and advertisers, interviewers and transcribers, and even occasionally, muses for some of the contributors during their, sometimes rather painful, "writing blocks". Most importantly, we saw our major role as editors being to encourage writers to delve even more deeply into their lives, to make some meaning out of it for themselves and their readers.

### Time and Money

Many people have commented on the relative speed in which this book was produced. In barely two years, the anthology grew from a seed of an idea to a published work. True, everyone has worked fast, including the publishers.

The anthology was created with a sense of urgency. From the moment of its conception, it was already long overdue. Two years ago when we started, we knew it was a book that should already have been in our hands.

*How do you concentrate on a project when you're worried about paying the rent?* We have sorely learned why so few women of color attempt this kind of project – no money to fall back on. In compiling this book we both maintained two or more jobs just to keep the book and ourselves alive. No time to write while waiting tables. No time for class preparation, to read students' papers, argue with your boss, have a love life or eat a decent meal when the deadline must be met. No money to buy stamps, to hire a lawyer "to go over the contract," to engage an agent. Both of us became expert jugglers of our energy and the few pennies in our piggybanks: Gloria's "little chicken" and Cherrie's "tecate bucket."

### Agradecimientos

*But oh there were the people who helped:* Leslie, Abigail, Leigh and her IBM selectric, Randy, David, Mirtha's arroz con picadillo and loving encouragement, Merlin and Adrienne's faith in the book, Jane and Sally's letting Cherrie change her mind, our women's studies students at San Francisco State University who put up with their two over-tired grumpy teachers, Debbie's backrubs, Jo who typed the whole damn manuscript, Barbara C. and her camera and crew, Barbara S.'s work in spreading the word in Boston, the friends who lent us money, and all

the other folks who supported our readings, our benefit parties, our efforts to get this book to press.

Most especially, of course, we wish to thank all the contributors whose commitment and insight made the nightly marathons we spent pulling out our hair worth it. They inspired the labor.

### **Putting Our Words into Practice**

With the completion of this anthology, a hundred other books and projects are waiting to be developed. Already, we hear tell in the wind from other contributors the possibility of a film about Third World Feminists, an anthology by Latina lesbians, a Third World feminist publishing house. We, women of color, are *not* without plans. This is exactly the kind of service we wish for the anthology to provide. It is a catalyst, not a definitive statement on "Third World Feminism in the U.S."

We see the book as a revolutionary tool falling into the hands of people of all colors. Just as we have been radicalized in the process of compiling this book, we hope it will radicalize others into action. We envision the book being used as a *required* text in most women's studies courses. And we don't mean just "special" courses on Third World Women or Racism, but also courses dealing with sexual politics, feminist thought, women's spirituality, etc. Similarly, we want to see this book on the shelf of, and used in the classroom by, every ethnic studies teacher in this country, male and female alike. Off campus, we expect the book to function as a consciousness-raiser for white women meeting together or working alone on the issues of racism. And, we want to see our colored sisters using the book as an educator and agitator around issues specific to our oppression as women.

We want the book in libraries, bookstores, at conferences, and union meetings in every major city and hole-in-the-wall in this country. And, of course, we hope to eventually see this book translated and leave this country, making tangible the link between Third World women in the U.S. and throughout the world.

Finally *tenemos la esperanza que This Bridge Called My Back* will find its way back into our families' lives.

The revolution begins at home.

Cherrie Moraga  
Gloria Anzaldúa

**THIS  
BRIDGE  
CALLED MY  
BACK**

**WRITINGS BY  
RADICAL  
WOMEN OF  
COLOR**



# Children Passing in the Streets



The Roots of Our Radicalism



"I learned to make my mind large, as the universe is large, so that there is room for paradoxes." – Maxine Hong Kingston\*

We are women from all kinds of childhood streets: the farms of Puerto Rico, the downtown streets of Chinatown, the barrio, city-Bronx streets, quiet suburban sidewalks, the plains, and the reservation.

In this first section, you will find voices from our childhoods, our youth. What we learned about survival – trying to-pass-for-white, easy-to-pass-for-white, "she couldn't pass in a million years." Here, we introduce to you the "color problem" as it was first introduced to us: "not white enuf, not dark enuf", always up against a color chart that first got erected far outside our families and our neighborhoods, but which invaded them both with systematic determination.

In speaking of color and class, Tillie Olsen once said: "There's no such thing as passing."\*\* Here are women of every shade of color and grade of class to prove that point. For although some of us traveled more easily from street corner to corner than the sister whose color or poverty made her an especially visible target to the violence on the street, *all* of us have been victims of the invisible violation which happens indoors and inside ourselves: the self-abnegation, the silence, the constant threat of cultural obliteration.

We were born into colored homes. We grew up with the inherent contradictions in the color spectrum right inside those homes: the lighter sister, the mixed-blood cousin, being the darkest one in the family. It doesn't take many years to realize the privileges, or lack thereof, attached to a particular shade of skin or texture of hair. It is this experience that moves light-skinned or "passable" Third World women to put ourselves on the line for our darker sisters. We are all family. From those families we were on the one hand encouraged to leave, to climb up white. And with the other hand, the reins were held tight on us, our parents understanding the danger that bordered our homes.

We learned to live with these contradictions. This is the root of our radicalism.

\*Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior* (New York: Vintage, 1977), p. 35.

\*\*From a talk given at The Women's Building sponsored by The Feminist Writers' Guild, San Francisco, November 1979.



# When I Was Growing Up

*Nellie Wong*

I know now that once I longed to be white.

How? you ask.

Let me tell you the ways.

when I was growing up, people told me  
I was dark and I believed my own darkness  
in the mirror, in my soul, my own narrow vision

when I was growing up, my sisters  
with fair skin got praised  
for their beauty, and in the dark  
I fell further, crushed between high walls

when I was growing up, I read magazines  
and saw movies, blonde movie stars, white skin,  
sensuous lips and to be elevated, to become  
a woman, a desirable woman, I began to wear  
imaginary pale skin

when I was growing up, I was proud  
of my English, my grammar, my spelling  
fitting into the group of smart children  
smart Chinese children, fitting in,  
belonging, getting in line

when I was growing up and went to high school,  
I discovered the rich white girls, a few yellow girls,  
their imported cotton dresses, their cashmere sweaters,  
their curly hair and I thought that I too should have  
what these lucky girls had

when I was growing up, I hungered  
for American food, American styles,  
coded: white and even to me, a child  
born of Chinese parents, being Chinese  
was feeling foreign, was limiting,  
was unAmerican

when I was growing up and a white man wanted  
to take me out, I thought I was special,  
an exotic gardenia, anxious to fit  
the stereotype of an oriental chick

when I was growing up, I felt ashamed  
of some yellow men, their small bones,  
their frail bodies, their spitting  
on the streets, their coughing,  
their lying in sunless rooms,  
shooting themselves in the arms

when I was growing up, people would ask  
if I were Filipino, Polynesian, Portuguese.  
They named all colors except white, the shell  
of my soul, but not my dark, rough skin

when I was growing up, I felt  
dirty. I thought that god  
made white people clean  
and no matter how much I bathed,  
I could not change, I could not shed  
my skin in the gray water

when I was growing up, I swore  
I would run away to purple mountains,  
houses by the sea with nothing over  
my head, with space to breathe,  
uncongested with yellow people in an area  
called Chinatown, in an area I later learned  
was a ghetto, one of many hearts  
of Asian America

I know now that once I longed to be white.  
How many more ways? you ask.  
Haven't I told you enough?

# on not bein

## *mary hope lee*

be a smart child trying to be dumb...  
 not blk enuf to lovinly ignore...  
 not bitter enuf to die at a early age...

– ntozake shange\*

she never wanted  
 no never once  
 did she wanna  
 be white/to pass  
 dreamed only of bein darker  
 she wanted to be darker  
 not yellow/not no high brown neither  
 but brown/warm brown  
 she dreamed/her body  
 moist earth brown  
 she prayed/for chocolate  
 semi/sweet/bitter/sweet  
 dark chocolate nipples crownin  
 her small chested tits  
 2 hersheys kisses  
 sittin sweet like top of  
 2 round scoops of smooth  
 milk chocolate ice cream



momma took her outta  
 almost all black lincoln high  
 cuz she useta catch hell  
 every day in gym class  
 the other girls reactin to her like  
 she was the cause of some  
 kinda gawdawful allergy they all had  
 contact could be fatal  
 survivors would be scarred  
 with kindness

\**Nappy Edges*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978).

cuz she wasn dark enuf  
was smart enuf  
wasn rowdy enuf  
had a white girl friend  
cuz none of them would be  
  
beige or buff/ecru or chamois  
jus wasn color/ed enuf  
to get picked for the softball team  
wasn sufficient protection  
'gainst gettin tripped in the shower

she wondered/  
would they have treated florence ballard  
so shabbily

□

but she envied them all  
felt every once now and then  
they just mighta been  
righteously justified  
since/after all  
they was brown like  
the sun loved they skin special  
cuz it warmed 'em

chestnut  
bronze  
copper  
sepia  
cinnamon  
cocoa  
mahogany

her/she was drab faded out  
yellow like a scorched july sky  
just fore it rains & rinses  
away the hint of brown from the smog

she wasn/  
no maureen peal

no 'high yellow dream child'

not/dichty

    a hex muttered

not/hinkty

    a curse let fly

not/saditty

like girls was spozed to be

did they went to catholic school or

was they from germantown or

baldwin hills or

valencia park

□

(the man she married/cuz he was the first one to ask/her  
bein afraid no body else would/said he thought he was gonna  
hafta marry hisself white cuz/he couldn find him no colored  
girl was/in-tel-li-gent e-nuff/but with her bein the next  
best thing to white . . .

# For the Color of My Mother

## *Cherríe Moraga*

*I am a white girl gone brown to the blood color of my mother  
speaking for her through the unnamed part of the mouth  
the wide-arched muzzle of brown women*

at two

my upper lip split open  
clear to the tip of my nose  
it spilled forth a cry that would not yield  
that travelled down six floors of hospital  
where doctors wound me into white bandages  
only the screaming mouth exposed

the gash sewn back into a snarl  
would last for years

*I am a white girl gone brown to the blood color of my mother  
speaking for her*

at five, her mouth

pressed into a seam  
a fine blue child's line drawn across her face  
her mouth, pressed into mouthing english  
mouthing yes yes yes  
mouthing stoop lift carry  
(sweating wet sighs into the field  
her red bandana comes loose from under the huge brimmed hat  
moving across her upper lip)

at fourteen, her mouth

painted, the ends drawn up  
the mole in the corner colored in darker larger mouthing yes  
she praying no no no  
lips pursed and moving

at forty-five, her mouth  
bleeding into her stomach  
the hole gaping growing redder  
deepening with my father's pallor  
finally stitched shut from hip to breastbone  
an inverted V

*Vera*

*Elvira*

*I am a white girl gone brown to the blood color of my mother  
speaking for her*

as it should be  
dark women come to me

sitting in circles

I pass through their hands  
the head of my mother  
painted in clay colors

touching each carved feature

swollen eyes and mouth

they understand the explosion the splitting  
open      contained within the fixed expression

they cradle her silence

nodding to me

# I Am What I Am

## Rosario Morales

I am what I am and I am U.S. American I haven't wanted to say it because if I did you'd take away the Puerto Rican but now I say go to hell I am what I am and you can't take it away with all the words and sneers at your command I am what I am I am Puerto Rican I am U.S. American I am New York Manhattan and the Bronx I am what I am I'm not hiding under no stoop behind no curtain I am what I am I am Boricua as boricuas come from the isle of Manhattan and I croon Carlos Gardel tangoes in my sleep and Afro-Cuban beats in my blood and Xavier Cugat's lukewarm latin is so familiar and dear sneer dear but he's familiar and dear but not Carmen Miranda who's a joke because I never was a joke I was a bit of a sensation See! here's a real true honest-to-god Puerto Rican girl and she's in college Hey! Mary come here and look she's from right here a South Bronx girl and she's honest-to-god in college now Ain't that something who would believed it Ain't science wonderful or some such thing a wonder a wonder

And someone who did languages for a living stopped me in the subway because how I spoke was a linguist's treat I mean there it was yiddish and spanish and fine refined college educated english and irish which I mainly keep in my prayers It's dirty now I haven't said my prayers in decades but try my Hail Marrrry full of grrrace with the nun's burr with the nun's disdain its all true and its all me do you know I got an English accent from the BBC I always say For years in the mountains of Puerto Rico when I was 22 and 24 and 26 all those young years I listened to the BBC and Radio Moscow's English english announcers announce and denounce and then I read Dickens all the way thru three or four times at least and then later I read Dickens aloud in voices and when I came back to the U.S. I spoke mockdickens and mockBritish especially when I want to be crisp efficient I know what I am doing and you can't scare me tough that's why I am what I am and I'm a bit of a snob too Shit! why am I calling myself names I really really dig the funny way the British speak and it's real it's true and I love too the singing of yiddish sentences that go with shrugs and hands and arms doing

melancholy or lively dances I love the sound and look of yiddish in the air in the body in the streets in the English language nooo so what's new so go by the grocer and buy some fruit oye vey gevalt gefilte fish raisele oh and those words

hundreds of them dotting the english language like raisins in the bread shnook and schlemiel suftik tush schmata all those soft sweet sounds saying sharp sharp things I am what I am and I'm naturalized Jewish-American wasp is foreign and new but Jewish-American is old show familiar schmata familiar and its me dears its me bagels blintzes and all I am what I am Take it or leave me alone.

# Dreams of Violence

## *Naomi Littlebear*

I was awakened by the sound of school children screaming at each other. I thought I heard them beating some one. Loud solid thumps quivered in my ears, a hoarse voice, horribly chanting in rapid succession, "oh my god, oh my god" . . .

I closed my eyes and sunk into the panic that terrorized my morning. I flew back in time, somewhere in grade school, walking home with my cousin Virginia . . .

### I

There was an unmistakeable bitter taste in the air around us, forewarning. It was the moment before the actual sight of them coming that froze our hearts with fear. Suddenly like a stampede of wild bulls they plummeted towards us. A half dozen or more boys, a frenzied blur of leather jackets, screaming wild devils, thrashing at us with the harsh stiff leather, metal teeth zippers battering our bewildered bodies. We ran on rubber band legs; I could hear Virginia calling, "Mama, Mama." In my ears was a sound like the beating of wings, barbed wings that stung my skin, that made my lip swell in pain, we ran hard thru the obstacle course of confused bodies, their horrifying shrieks of rage thru the rain of leather.

By some miracle they scattered, the same force that brought them seemed to snatch them up again and they were scattered to other dark corners of the barrio.

My face was hot and swollen, i felt my tears burning rivers down my cheeks. I could still hear Virginia crying for her mother, though now she was just a mass of pain & crying. I could remember my own silence thundering thru my body.

As we neared home, my fear increased. I knew what would await me there. I could close my eyes and see the vision a hundred times over.

I would slowly approach the door and before my entire body entered, she could smell the mischief, sense the energy – my grandmother immediately stopped whatever she was doing and demanded a full story. But always my story would be cut in mid-sentence. Because whatever state i was in, i provoked it.

"Why are you Dirty?" "Have you been fighting?" "Did you tear your dress?" — a volley of quick demands and accusations came threateningly to me, making me feel scared, watching her come towards me, reaching over to the door where the razor strap hung "her bonito" as she called it. Reaching towards me, strap in hand. My feet turning to lead. Trying to run away, backing into a corner.

## II

But where the strap couldn't reach me, a vicious pinch could. I flew thru the door being chased by more leather stings.

I ran far, sometimes two blocks away, my skin boiling, red criss-crosses atop the scratches that the leather jackets had made. I cried alone barely able to make out the shapes of people and cars thru my tears.



I am awake now, my lover still sleeping beside me, wondering how we can blend our two worlds. How to mend the holes in our pasts, walk away bravely from the nightmares.

Her attacks were more subtle, hidden within the false shelter of her home; instead of gangs of boys chasing her, her brother was the nightly intrusion, using her young child body to masturbate with, as she closed her eyes too numb and scared to speak.

We both have no choice but to be survivors though the fears are still there. Whenever i see a crowd of men, my heart sinks to my feet, whenever i hear sudden noises, sudden crashing, anger, male noises, their very laughter is abrasive to my ears. I shrink inside, walk close to the walls of my soul, i look for a place to hide.

# He Saw *Chrystos*

his roots/went back to the reservation old  
pain/old hunger  
None of the ghosts were there  
He went fishing      caught  
one or more every  
day      The fishing is what he needed to do  
Gathering wild rice, remembered after years of suits, ties, clocks  
adjustments  
what he began  
& left  
He writes me about the fish  
I grow hungry  
He gave me all the whitest advantages  
square house, football school, white mother baking white bread in a  
white oven  
He wanted to spare me his pain  
didn't  
Silently our misunderstandings shred   rage clouds our blood ties  
I stare at his words      wonder who he is  
Lonely red daddy cradling ghost of his mama   died when he was nine  
pretending he was born without a father   without straightjackets  
Daddy you write   in a painfully practiced scrawl  
you learned      learned learned beaten down a dying fish  
You go back & can't stay  
Bring me a sack of rice  
I want your wildness, want the boy who left on a freight car  
I want a boy who cried because his mother is dead  
& his daddy's gone crazy  
I want the one who gathered water & wood  
I don't want this man who cut off his hair  
joined the government  
to be safe

We are both in danger  
of your ancient fear  
I learned to fish on my own  
stopped  
Now I'm learning to weave nets



## Entering the Lives of Others



Theory in the Flesh



"I am not interested in pursuing a society that uses analysis, research, and experimentation to concretize their vision of cruel destinies for those bastards of the pilgrims; a society with arrogance rising, moon in oppression, and sun in destruction."

Barbara Cameron

A theory in the flesh means one where the physical realities of our lives – our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings – all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity. Here, we attempt to bridge the contradictions in our experience:

We are the colored in a white feminist movement.

We are the feminists among the people of our culture.

We are often the lesbians among the straight.

We do this bridging by naming our selves and by telling our stories in our own words.

The theme echoing throughout most of these stories is our refusal of the *easy* explanation to the conditions we live in. There is nothing *easy* about a collective cultural history of what Mitsuye Yamada calls "unnatural disasters": the forced encampment of Indigenous people on government reservations, the forced encampment of Japanese American people during WWII, the forced encampment of our mothers as laborers in factories/in fields/in our own and other people's homes as paid or unpaid slaves.

Closer to home, we are still trying to separate the fibers of experience we have had as daughters of a struggling people. Daily, we feel the pull and tug of having to choose between which parts of our mothers' heritages we want to claim and wear and which parts have served to cloak us from the knowledge of ourselves. "My mother and I work to unravel the knot" (Levins Morales).

This is how our theory develops. We are interested in pursuing a society that uses flesh and blood experiences to concretize a vision that can begin to heal our "wounded knee" (Chrystos).



# Wonder Woman

## *Genny Lim*

Sometimes I see reflections on bits of glass on sidewalks  
I catch the glimmer of empty bottles floating out to sea  
Sometimes I stretch my arms way above my head and wonder if  
There are women along the Mekong doing the same

Sometimes I stare longingly at women who I will never know  
Generous, laughing women with wrinkled cheeks and white teeth  
Dragging along chubby, rosy-cheeked babies on fat, wobbly legs  
Sometimes I stare at Chinese grandmothers  
Getting on the 30 Stockton with shopping bags  
Japanese women tourists in European hats  
Middle-aged mothers with laundry carts  
Young wives holding hands with their husbands  
Lesbian women holding hands in coffee-houses  
Smiling debutantes with bouquets of yellow daffodils  
Silver-haired matrons with silver rhinestoned poodles  
Painted prostitutes posing along MacArthur Boulevard  
Giddy teenage girls snapping gum in fast cars  
Widows clutching bibles, crucifixes

I look at them and wonder if  
They are a part of me  
I look in their eyes and wonder if  
They share my dreams

I wonder if the woman in mink is content  
If the stockbroker's wife is afraid of growing old  
If the professor's wife is an alcoholic  
If the woman in prison is me

There are copper-tanned women in Hyannis Port playing tennis  
Women who eat with finger bowls  
There are women in factories punching time clocks  
Women tired every waking hour of the day

I wonder why there are women born with silver spoons  
in their mouths

Women who have never known a day of hunger  
Women who have never changed their own bed linen  
And I wonder why there are women who must work  
Women who must clean other women's houses  
Women who must shell shrimps for pennies a day  
Women who must sew other women's clothes  
Who must cook  
Who must die  
In childbirth  
In dreams

Why must woman stand divided?  
Building the walls that tear them down?  
Jill-of-all-trades

Lover, mother, housewife, friend, breadwinner  
Heart and spade  
A woman is a ritual  
A house that must accommodate  
A house that must endure  
Generation after generation  
Of wind and torment, of fire and rain  
A house with echoing rooms  
Closets with hidden cries  
Walls with stretchmarks  
Windows with eyes

Short, tall, skinny, fat  
Pregnant, married, white, yellow, black, brown, red  
Professional, working-class, aristocrat  
Women cooking over coals in sampans  
Women shining tiffany spoons in glass houses  
Women stretching their arms way above the clouds  
In Samarkand, in San Francisco  
Along the Mekong

## La Güera

### *Cherrie Moraga*

It requires something more than personal experience to gain a philosophy or point of view from any specific event. It is the quality of our response to the event and our capacity to enter into the lives of others that help us to make their lives and experiences our own.

Emma Goldman\*

I am the very well-educated daughter of a woman who, by the standards in this country, would be considered largely illiterate. My mother was born in Santa Paula, Southern California, at a time when much of the central valley there was still farm land. Nearly thirty-five years later, in 1948, she was the only daughter of six to marry an anglo, my father.

I remember all of my mother's stories, probably much better than she realizes. She is a fine story-teller, recalling every event of her life with the vividness of the present, noting each detail right down to the cut and color of her dress. I remember stories of her being pulled out of school at the ages of five, seven, nine, and eleven to work in the fields, along with her brothers and sisters; stories of her father drinking away whatever small profit she was able to make for the family; of her going the long way home to avoid meeting him on the street, staggering toward the same destination. I remember stories of my mother lying about her age in order to get a job as a hat-check girl at Agua Caliente Racetrack in Tijuana. At fourteen, she was the main support of the family. I can still see her walking home alone at 3 a.m., only to turn all of her salary and tips over to her mother, who was pregnant again.

The stories continue through the war years and on: walnut-cracking factories, the Voit Rubber factory, and then the computer boom. I remember my mother doing piecework for the electronics plant in our neighborhood. In the late evening, she would sit in front of the T.V. set, wrapping copper wires into the backs of circuit boards, talking about "keeping up with the younger girls." By that time, she was already in her mid-fifties.

\*Alix Kates Shulman, "Was My Life Worth Living?" *Red Emma Speaks*. (New York: Random House, 1972), p. 388.

Meanwhile, I was college-prep in school. After classes, I would go with my mother to fill out job applications for her, or write checks for her at the supermarket. We would have the scenario all worked out ahead of time. My mother would sign the check before we'd get to the store. Then, as we'd approach the checkstand, she would say – within earshot of the cashier – "oh honey, you go 'head and make out the check," as if she couldn't be bothered with such an insignificant detail. No one asked any questions.

I was educated, and wore it with a keen sense of pride and satisfaction, my head propped up with the knowledge, from my mother, that my life would be easier than hers. I was educated; but more than this, I was "*la güera*": fair-skinned. Born with the features of my Chicana mother, but the skin of my Anglo father, I had it made.

No one ever quite told me this (that light was right), but I knew that being light was something valued in my family (who were all Chicano, with the exception of my father). In fact, everything about my upbringing (at least what occurred on a conscious level) attempted to bleach me of what color I did have. Although my mother was fluent in it, I was never taught much Spanish at home. I picked up what I did learn from school and from over-heard snatches of conversation among my relatives and mother. She often called other lower-income Mexicans "braceros", or "wet-backs", referring to herself and her family as "a different class of people." And yet, the real story was that my family, too, had been poor (some still are) and farmworkers. My mother can remember this in her blood as if it were yesterday. But this is something she would like to forget (and rightfully), for to her, on a basic economic level, being Chicana meant being "less." It was through my mother's desire to protect her children from poverty and illiteracy that we became "*anglocized*"; the more effectively we could pass in the white world, the better guaranteed our future.

From all of this, I experience, daily, a huge disparity between what I was born into and what I was to grow up to become. Because, (as Goldman suggests) these stories my mother told me crept under my "*güera*" skin. I had no choice but to enter into the life of my mother. *I had no choice.* I took her life into my heart, but managed to keep a lid on it as long as I feigned being the happy, upwardly mobile heterosexual.

When I finally lifted the lid to my lesbianism, a profound connection with my mother reawakened in me. It wasn't until I acknowledged and confronted my own lesbianism in the flesh, that my heartfelt identification with and empathy for my mother's oppression – due to being poor, uneducated, and Chicana – was realized. My lesbianism is the avenue through which I have learned the most about silence and

oppression, and it continues to be the most tactile reminder to me that we are not free human beings.

You see, one follows the other. I had known for years that I was a lesbian, had felt it in my bones, had ached with the knowledge, gone crazed with the knowledge, wallowed in the silence of it. Silence is like starvation. Don't be fooled. It's nothing short of that, and felt most sharply when one has had a full belly most of her life. When we are not physically starving, we have the luxury to realize psychic and emotional starvation. It is from this starvation that other starvations can be recognized – if one is willing to take the risk of making the connection – if one is willing to be responsible to the result of the connection. For me, the connection is an inevitable one.

What I am saying is that the joys of looking like a white girl ain't so great since I realized I could be beaten on the street for being a dyke. If my sister's being beaten because she's Black, it's pretty much the same principle. We're both getting beaten any way you look at it. The connection is blatant; and in the case of my own family, the difference in the privileges attached to looking white instead of brown are merely a generation apart.

In this country, lesbianism is a poverty – as is being brown, as is being a woman, as is being just plain poor. The danger lies in ranking the oppressions. *The danger lies in failing to acknowledge the specificity of the oppression.* The danger lies in attempting to deal with oppression purely from a theoretical base. Without an emotional, heartfelt grappling with the source of our own oppression, without naming the enemy within ourselves and outside of us, no authentic, non-hierarchical connection among oppressed groups can take place.

When the going gets rough, will we abandon our so-called comrades in a flurry of racist/heterosexist/what-have-you panic? To whose camp, then, should the lesbian of color retreat? Her very presence violates the ranking and abstraction of oppression. Do we merely live hand to mouth? Do we merely struggle with the "ism" that's sitting on top of our own heads?

The answer is: yes, I think first we do; and we must do so thoroughly and deeply. But to fail to move out from there will only isolate us in our own oppression – will only insulate, rather than radicalize us.

To illustrate: a gay male friend of mine once confided to me that he continued to feel that, on some level, I didn't trust him because he was male; that he felt, really, if it ever came down to a "battle of the sexes", I might kill him. I admitted that I might very well. He wanted to understand the source of my distrust. I responded, "You're not a woman. Be a woman for a day. Imagine being a woman." He confessed that the thought terrified him because, to him, being a woman meant being

raped by men. He *had* felt raped by men; he wanted to forget what that meant. What grew from that discussion was the realization that in order for him to create an authentic alliance with me, he must deal with the primary source of his own sense of oppression. He must, first, emotionally come to terms with what it feels like to be a victim. If he – or anyone – were to truly do this, it would be impossible to discount the oppression of others, except by again forgetting how we have been hurt.

And yet, oppressed groups are forgetting all the time. There are instances of this in the rising Black middle class, and certainly an obvious trend of such "unconsciousness" among white gay men. Because to remember may mean giving up whatever privileges we have managed to squeeze out of this society by virtue of our gender, race, class, or sexuality.

Within the women's movement, the connections among women of different backgrounds and sexual orientations have been fragile, at best. I think this phenomenon is indicative of our failure to seriously address ourselves to some very frightening questions: How have I internalized my own oppression? How have I oppressed? Instead, we have let rhetoric do the job of poetry. Even the word "oppression" has lost its power. We need a new language, better words that can more closely describe women's fear of and resistance to one another; words that will not always come out sounding like dogma.

What prompted me in the first place to work on an anthology by radical women of color was a deep sense that I had a valuable insight to contribute, by virtue of my birthright and background. And yet, I don't really understand first-hand what it feels like being shittied on for being brown. I understand much more about the joys of it – being Chicana and having family are synonymous for me. What I know about loving, singing, crying, telling stories, speaking with my heart and hands, even having a sense of my own soul comes from the love of my mother, aunts, cousins...

But at the age of twenty-seven, it is frightening to acknowledge that I have internalized a racism and classism, where the object of oppression is not only someone outside of my skin, but the someone inside my skin. In fact, to a large degree, the real battle with such oppression, for all of us, begins under the skin. I have had to confront the fact that much of what I value about being Chicana, about my family, has been subverted by anglo culture and my own cooperation with it. This realization did not occur to me overnight. For example, it wasn't until long after my graduation from the private college I'd attended in Los Angeles, that I realized the major reason for my total alienation from and fear of my classmates was rooted in class and culture. CLICK.

Three years after graduation, in an apple-orchard in Sonoma, a friend of mine (who comes from an Italian Irish working-class family) says to me, "Cherrie, no wonder you felt like such a nut in school. Most of the people there were white and rich." It was true. All along I had felt the difference, but not until I had put the words "class" and "color" to the experience, did my feelings make any sense. For years, I had berated myself for not being as "free" as my classmates. I completely bought that they simply had more guts than I did – to rebel against their parents and run around the country hitch-hiking, reading books and studying "art." They had enough privilege to be atheists, for chrissake. There was no one around filling in the disparity for me between their parents, who were Hollywood filmmakers, and my parents, who wouldn't know the name of a filmmaker if their lives depended on it (and precisely because their lives didn't depend on it, they couldn't be bothered). But I knew nothing about "privilege" then. White was right. Period. I could pass. If I got educated enough, there would never be any telling.

Three years after that, another CLICK. In a letter to Barbara Smith, I wrote:

I went to a concert where Ntosake Shange was reading. There, everything exploded for me. She was speaking a language that I knew – in the deepest parts of me – existed, and that I had ignored in my own feminist studies and even in my own writing. What Ntosake caught in me is the realization that in my development as a poet, I have, in many ways, denied the voice of my brown mother – the brown in me. I have acclimated to the sound of a white language which, as my father represents it, does not speak to the emotions in my poems – emotions which stem from the love of my mother.

The reading was agitating. Made me uncomfortable. Threw me into a week-long terror of how deeply I was affected. I felt that I had to start all over again. That I turned only to the perceptions of white middle-class women to speak for me and all women. I am shocked by my own ignorance.

Sitting in that auditorium chair was the first time I had realized to the core of me that for years I had disowned the language I knew best – ignored the words and rhythms that were the closest to me. The sounds of my mother and aunts gossiping – half in English, half in Spanish – while drinking cerveza in the kitchen. And the hands – I had cut off the hands in my poems. But not in conversation; still the hands could not be kept down. Still they insisted on moving.

The reading had forced me to remember that I knew things from my roots. But to remember puts me up against what I don't know. Shange's reading agitated me because she spoke with power about a world that

is both alien and common to me: "the capacity to enter into the lives of others." But you can't just take the goods and run. I knew that then, sitting in the Oakland auditorium (as I know in my poetry), that the only thing worth writing about is what seems to be unknown and, therefore, fearful.

The "unknown" is often depicted in racist literature as the "darkness" within a person. Similarly, sexist writers will refer to fear in the form of the vagina, calling it "the orifice of death." In contrast, it is a pleasure to read works such as Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior*, where fear and alienation are described as "the white ghosts." And yet, the bulk of literature in this country reinforces the myth that what is dark and female is evil. Consequently, each of us – whether dark, female, or both – has in some way *internalized* this oppressive imagery. What the oppressor often succeeds in doing is simply *externalizing* his fears, projecting them into the bodies of women, Asians, gays, disabled folks, whoever seems most "other."

call me  
 roach and presumptuous  
 nightmare on your white pillow  
 your itch to destroy  
 the indestructible  
 part of yourself

Audre Lorde\*

But it is not really difference the oppressor fears so much as similarity. He fears he will discover in himself the same aches, the same longings as those of the people he has shitted on. He fears the immobilization threatened by his own incipient guilt. He fears he will have to change his life once he has seen himself in the bodies of the people he has called different. He fears the hatred, anger, and vengeance of those he has hurt.

This is the oppressor's nightmare, but it is not exclusive to him. We women have a similar nightmare, for each of us in some way has been both oppressed and the oppressor. We are afraid to look at how we have failed each other. We are afraid to see how we have taken the values of our oppressor into our hearts and turned them against ourselves and one another. We are afraid to admit how deeply "the man's" words have been ingrained in us.

To assess the damage is a dangerous act. I think of how, even as a feminist lesbian, I have so wanted to ignore my own homophobia, my own hatred of myself for being queer. I have not wanted to admit that

\*From "The Brown Menace or Poem to the Survival of Roaches", *The New York Head Shop and Museum* (Detroit: Broadside, 1974), p. 48.

my deepest personal sense of myself has not quite "caught up" with my "woman-identified" politics. I have been afraid to criticize lesbian writers who choose to "skip over" these issues in the name of feminism. In 1979, we talk of "old gay" and "butch and femme" roles as if they were ancient history. We toss them aside as merely patriarchal notions. And yet, the truth of the matter is that I have sometimes taken society's fear and hatred of lesbians to bed with me. I have sometimes hated my lover for loving me. I have sometimes felt "not woman enough" for her. I have sometimes felt "not man enough." For a lesbian trying to survive in a heterosexist society, there is no easy way around these emotions. Similarly, in a white-dominated world, there is little getting around racism and our own internalization of it. It's always there, embodied in some one we least expect to rub up against.

When we do rub up against this person, *there* then is the challenge. *There* then is the opportunity to look at the nightmare within us. But we usually shrink from such a challenge.

Time and time again, I have observed that the usual response among white women's groups when the "racism issue" comes up is to deny the difference. I have heard comments like, "Well, we're open to *all* women; why don't they (women of color) come? You can only do so much . . ." But there is seldom any analysis of how the very nature and structure of the group itself may be founded on racist or classist assumptions. More importantly, so often the women seem to feel no loss, no lack, no absence when women of color are not involved; therefore, there is little desire to change the situation. This has hurt me deeply. I have come to believe that the only reason women of a privileged class will dare to look at *how* it is that *they* oppress, is when they've come to know the meaning of their own oppression. And understand that the oppression of others hurts them personally.

The other side of the story is that women of color and working-class women often shrink from challenging white middle-class women. It is much easier to rank oppressions and set up a hierarchy, rather than take responsibility for changing our own lives. We have failed to demand that white women, particularly those who claim to be speaking for all women, be accountable for their racism.

The dialogue has simply not gone deep enough.

I have many times questioned my right to even work on an anthology which is to be written "exclusively by Third World women." I have had to look critically at my claim to color, at a time when, among white feminist ranks, it is a "politically correct" (and sometimes peripherally advantageous) assertion to make. I must acknowledge the fact that, physically, I have had a *choice* about making that claim, in contrast to women who have not had such a choice, and have been

abused for their color. I must reckon with the fact that for most of my life, by virtue of the very fact that I am white-looking, I identified with and aspired toward white values, and that I rode the wave of that Southern Californian privilege as far as conscience would let me.

Well, now I feel both bleached and beached. I feel angry about this – the years when I refused to recognize privilege, both when it worked against me, and when I worked it, ignorantly, at the expense of others. These are not settled issues. That is why this work feels so risky to me. It continues to be discovery. It has brought me into contact with women who invariably know a hell of a lot more than I do about racism, as experienced in the flesh, as revealed in the flesh of their writing.

I think: what is my responsibility to my roots – both white and brown, Spanish-speaking and English? I am a woman with a foot in both worlds; and I refuse the split. I feel the necessity for dialogue. Sometimes I feel it urgently.

But one voice is not enough, nor two, although this is where dialogue begins. It is essential that radical feminists confront their fear of and resistance to each other, because without this, there *will* be no bread on the table. Simply, we will not survive. If we could make this connection in our heart of hearts, that if we are serious about a revolution – better – if we seriously believe there should be joy in our lives (real joy, not just "good times"), then we need one another. We women need each other. Because my/your solitary, self-asserting "go-for-the-throat-of-fear" power is not enough. The real power, as you and I well know, is collective. I can't afford to be afraid of you, nor you of me. If it takes head-on collisions, let's do it: this polite timidity is killing us.

As Lorde suggests in the passage I cited earlier, it is in looking to the nightmare that the dream is found. There, the survivor emerges to insist on a future, a vision, yes, born out of what is dark and female. The feminist movement must be a movement of such survivors, a movement with a future.

September, 1979.

# Invisibility is an Unnatural Disaster: Reflections of an Asian American Woman

*Mitsuye Yamada*

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Last year for the Asian segment of the Ethnic American Literature course I was teaching, I selected a new anthology entitled *Aiiieeeee!* compiled by a group of outspoken Asian American writers. During the discussion of the long but thought-provoking introduction to this anthology, one of my students blurted out that she was offended by its militant tone and that as a white person she was tired of always being blamed for the oppression of all the minorities. I noticed several of her classmates' eyes nodding in tacit agreement. A discussion of the "militant" voices in some of the other writings we had read in the course ensued. Surely, I pointed out, some of these other writings have been just as, if not more, militant as the words in this introduction? Had they been offended by those also but failed to express their feelings about them? To my surprise, they said they were not offended by any of the Black American, Chicano or Native American writings, but were hard-pressed to explain why when I asked for an explanation. A little further discussion revealed that they "understood" the anger expressed by the Black and Chicanos and they "empathized" with the frustrations and sorrow expressed by the Native American. But the Asian Americans??

Then finally, one student said it for all of them: "It made me angry. *Their* anger made *me* angry, because I didn't even know the Asian Americans felt oppressed. I didn't expect their anger."

At this time I was involved in an academic due process procedure begun as a result of a grievance I had filed the previous semester against the administrators at my college. I had filed a grievance for violation of my rights as a teacher who had worked in the district for almost eleven years. My student's remark "Their anger made me angry . . . I didn't expect their anger," explained for me the reactions of some of my own colleagues as well as the reactions of the administrators during those previous months. The grievance procedure was a time-consuming and emotionally draining process, but the basic principle was too important for me to ignore. That basic principle was that I, an individual teacher, do have certain rights which are given and my superiors cannot, should not, violate them with impunity. When this was pointed out to them, however, they responded with shocked sur-

prise that I, of all people, would take them to task for violation of what was clearly written policy in our college district. They all seemed to exclaim, "We don't understand this; this is so uncharacteristic of her; she seemed such a nice person, so polite, so obedient, so non-trouble-making." What was even more surprising was once they were forced to acknowledge that I was determined to start the due process action, they assumed I was not doing it on my own. One of the administrators suggested someone must have pushed me into this, undoubtedly some of "those feminists" on our campus, he said wryly.

In this age when women are clearly making themselves visible on all fronts, I, an Asian American woman, am still functioning as a "front for those feminists" and therefore invisible. The realization of this sinks in slowly. Asian Americans as a whole are finally coming to claim their own, demanding that they be included in the multicultural history of our country. I like to think, in spite of my administrator's myopia, that the most stereotyped minority of them all, the Asian American woman, is just now emerging to become part of that group. It took forever. Perhaps it is important to ask ourselves why it took so long. We should ask ourselves this question just when we think we are emerging as a viable minority in the fabric of our society. I should add to my student's words, "because I didn't even know they felt oppressed," that it took this long because we Asian American women have not admitted to ourselves that we *were* oppressed. We, the visible minority that is invisible.

I say this because until a few years ago I have been an Asian American woman working among non-Asians in an educational institution where most of the decision-makers were men\*; an Asian American woman thriving under the smug illusion that I was *not* the stereotypic image of the Asian woman because I had a career teaching English in a community college. I did not think anything assertive was necessary to make my point. People who know me, I reasoned, the ones who count, know who I am and what I think. Thus, even when what I considered a veiled racist remark was made in a casual social setting, I would "let it go" because it was pointless to argue with people who didn't even know their remark was racist. I had supposed that I was practicing passive resistance while being stereotyped, but it was so passive no one noticed I was resisting; it was so much my expected role that it ultimately rendered me invisible.

My experience leads me to believe that contrary to what I thought, I had actually been contributing to my own stereotyping. Like the hero

\*It is hoped this will change now that a black woman is Chancellor of our college district.

in Ralph Ellison's novel *The Invisible Man*, I had become invisible to white Americans, and it clung to me like a bad habit. Like most bad habits, this one crept up on me because I took it in minute doses like Mithradates' poison and my mind and body adapted so well to it I hardly noticed it was there.

For the past eleven years I have busied myself with the usual chores of an English teacher, a wife of a research chemist, and a mother of four rapidly growing children. I hadn't even done much to shatter this particular stereotype: the middle class woman happy to be bringing home the extra income and quietly fitting into the man's world of work. When the Asian American woman is lulled into believing that people perceive her as being different from other Asian women (the submissive, subservient, ready-to-please, easy-to-get-along-with Asian woman), she is kept comfortably content with the state of things. She becomes ineffectual in the milieu in which she moves. The seemingly apolitical middle class woman and the apolitical Asian woman constituted a double invisibility.

I had created an underground culture of survival for myself and had become in the eyes of others the person I was trying not to be. Because I was permitted to go to college, permitted to take a stab at a career or two along the way, given "free choice" to marry and have a family, given a "choice" to eventually do both, I had assumed I was more or less free, not realizing that those who are free make and take choices; they do not choose from options proffered by "those out there."

I, personally, had not "emerged" until I was almost fifty years old. Apparently through a long conditioning process, I had learned how *not* to be seen for what I am. A long history of ineffectual activities had been, I realize now, initiation rites toward my eventual invisibility. The training begins in childhood; and for women and minorities, whatever is started in childhood is continued throughout their adult lives. I first recognized just how invisible I was in my first real confrontation with my parents a few years after the outbreak of World War II.

During the early years of the war, my older brother, Mike, and I left the concentration camp in Idaho to work and study at the University of Cincinnati. My parents came to Cincinnati soon after my father's release from Internment Camp (these were POW camps to which many of the Issei\* men, leaders in their communities, were sent by the FBI), and worked as domestics in the suburbs. I did not see them too often because by this time I had met and was much influenced by a pacifist who was out on a "furlough" from a conscientious objectors'

\*Issei – Immigrant Japanese, living in the U.S.

camp in Trenton, North Dakota. When my parents learned about my "boy friend" they were appalled and frightened. After all, this was the period when everyone in the country was expected to be one-hundred percent behind the war effort, and the Nisei\* boys who had volunteered for the Armed Forces were out there fighting and dying to prove how American we really were. However, during interminable arguments with my father and overheard arguments between my parents, I was devastated to learn they were not so much concerned about my having become a pacifist, but they were more concerned about the possibility of my marrying one. They were understandably frightened (my father's prison years of course were still fresh on his mind) about repercussions on the rest of the family. In an attempt to make my father understand me, I argued that even if I didn't marry him, I'd still be a pacifist; but my father reassured me that it was "all right" for me to be a pacifist because as a Japanese national and a "girl" *it didn't make any difference to anyone*. In frustration I remember shouting, "But can't you see, I'm philosophically committed to the pacifist cause," but he dismissed this with "In my college days we used to call philosophy, foolosophy," and that was the end of that. When they were finally convinced I was not going to marry "my pacifist," the subject was dropped and we never discussed it again.

As if to confirm my father's assessment of the harmlessness of my opinions, my brother Mike, an American citizen, was suddenly expelled from the University of Cincinnati while I, "an enemy alien", was permitted to stay. We assumed that his stand as a pacifist, although he was classified a 4-F because of his health, contributed to his expulsion. We were told the Air Force was conducting sensitive wartime research on campus and requested his removal, but they apparently felt my presence on campus was not as threatening.

I left Cincinnati in 1945, hoping to leave behind this and other unpleasant memories gathered there during the war years, and plunged right into the politically active atmosphere at New York University where students, many of them returning veterans, were continuously promoting one cause or other by making speeches in Washington Square, passing out petitions, or staging demonstrations. On one occasion, I tagged along with a group of students who took a train to Albany to demonstrate on the steps of the State Capitol. I think I was the only Asian in this group of predominantly Jewish students from NYU. People who passed us were amused and shouted "Go home and grow up." I suppose Governor Dewey, who refused to see us, assumed we were a group of adolescents without a cause as most college

\*Nisei – Second generation Japanese, born in the U.S.

students were considered to be during those days. It appears they weren't expecting any results from our demonstration. There were no newscasters, no security persons, no police. No one tried to stop us from doing what we were doing. We simply did "our thing" and went back to our studies until next time, and my father's words were again confirmed: it made no difference to anyone, being a young student demonstrator in peacetime, 1947.

Not only the young, but those who feel powerless over their own lives know what it is like not to make a difference on anyone or anything. The poor know it only too well, and we women have known it since we were little girls. The most insidious part of this conditioning process, I realize now, was that we have been trained not to expect a response in ways that mattered. We may be listened to and responded to with placating words and gestures, but our psychological mind set has already told us time and again that we were born into a ready-made world into which we must fit ourselves, and that many of us do it very well.

This mind set is the result of not believing that the political and social forces affecting our lives are determined by some person, or a group of persons, probably sitting behind a desk or around a conference table.

Just recently I read an article about "the remarkable track record of success" of the Nisei in the United States. One Nisei was quoted as saying he attributed our stamina and endurance to our ancestors whose characters had been shaped, he said, by their living in a country which has been constantly besieged by all manner of natural disasters, such as earthquakes and hurricanes. He said the Nisei has inherited a steely will, a will to endure and hence, to survive.

This evolutionary explanation disturbs me, because it equates the "act of God" (i.e. natural disasters) to the "act of man" (i.e., the war, the evacuation). The former is not within our power to alter, but the latter, I should think, is. By putting the "acts of God" on par with the acts of man, we shrug off personal responsibilities.

I have, for too long a period of time accepted the opinion of others (even though they were directly affecting my life) as if they were objective events totally out of my control. Because I separated such opinions from the persons who were making them, I accepted them the way I accepted natural disasters; and I endured them as inevitable. I have tried to cope with people whose points of view alarmed me in the same way that I had adjusted to natural phenomena, such as hurricanes, which plowed into my life from time to time. I would readjust my dismantled feelings in the same way that we repaired the broken shutters after the storm. The Japanese have an all-purpose expression

in their language for this attitude of resigned acceptance: "Shikataganai." "It can't be helped." "There's nothing I can do about it." It is said with the shrug of the shoulders and tone of finality, perhaps not unlike the "those-were-my-orders" tone that was used at the Nuremberg trials. With all the sociological studies that have been made about the causes of the evacuations of the Japanese Americans during World War II, we should know by now that "they" knew that the West Coast Japanese Americans would go without too much protest, and of course, "they" were right, for most of us (with the exception of those notable few), resigned to our fate, albeit bewildered and not willingly. We were not perceived by our government as responsive Americans; we were objects that happened to be standing in the path of the storm.

Perhaps this kind of acceptance is a way of coping with the "real" world. One stands against the wind for a time, and then succumbs eventually because there is no point to being stubborn against all odds. The wind will not respond to entreaties anyway, one reasons; one should have sense enough to know that. I'm not ready to accept this evolutionary reasoning. It is too rigid for me; I would like to think that my new awareness is going to make me more visible than ever, and to allow me to make some changes in the "man made disaster" I live in at the present time. Part of being visible is refusing to separate the actors from their actions, and demanding that they be responsible for them.

By now, riding along with the minorities' and women's movements, I think we are making a wedge into the main body of American life, but people are still looking right through and around us, assuming we are simply tagging along. Asian American women still remain in the background and we are heard but not really listened to. Like Musak, they think we are piped into the airwaves by someone else. We must remember that one of the most insidious ways of keeping women and minorities powerless is to let them only talk about harmless and inconsequential subjects, or let them speak freely and not listen to them with serious intent.

We need to raise our voices a little more, even as they say to us "This is so uncharacteristic of you." To finally recognize our own invisibility is to finally be on the path toward visibility. Invisibility is not a natural state for anyone.

# It's In My Blood, My Face – My Mother's Voice, The Way I Sweat

*Anita Valerio*

Hey ya hey ya ho – where the sun does not malign the seasons

I remember the place where the sun does not malign the seasons flutes of penitentes & headdresses for the Okan\* we rub our offerings of dried meat into the earth and the holy woman comes out and dances she is wearing the sacred headdress she is one of the last qualified to do this my mother says it is because she has only been with her husband and never any other man it makes her a virgin of sorts my mother says its hard to find a woman like that these days a holy woman and that is why I sometimes don't want to think about being Indian why sometimes I could really care less these days it's sad. There was a time three years back when I was so angry so proud I wanted so much to reclaim my *language* the symbols and sacred gestures the land but now? I went back to the reserve for two months traditional cultures are conservative and this one is patriarchal

What does it mean that it is a holy *woman* who sets up the Okan? and why does it make her holy that only one man has touched her? is it really because she has been a good little piece of property to that one man or is it because she is a pure vessel of female power not permeated with the male? is her setting up the Okan – which is the principal ceremony of the culture – a hearkening back to earlier matriarchal times? it seems as though you can't always trust people's interpretations as their minds have been colored by Catholicism – t.v. etc. Some would like to believe that the values of the Roman Catholic Church and the values of the Native American tribal religions are one and the same. Hah! being totally traditional seems wrong as well as it seems the task is first to find out what was our tradition – feel it through the skin.

My earliest memories are the best innocence may be an escalation of memory brings desires smells of morning – standing on the porch and smelling morning blue sky rolling hills unrest ecstasy was in my soul there seemed to be balance then before I knew

\*The Sundance.

the meaning of the word later I wanted to go back to it the wild spacious morning air the horses corralled the red barn and the sticky hot summer nights watching the pickup trucks come in from town Being an Indian... I didn't even realize that's what I was – an Indian – in fact I jumped up and down in protest "I'm not an Indian – I'm not an Indian!" when my relatives would tell me I was. After all, Indians were the bad guys on T.V. and though we didn't have running water that year or even telephones – yes – we did have television. Apparently, there were also times when I'd scream "I'm an Indian, I'm an Indian" when my relatives would say I wasn't... Such has been life.

Just what it is to be an "Indian" – Native American – a Skin... & more importantly how do I – half blood Indian and half Chicana relate to it all? Well, sometimes I've made quite an occupation of thinking about it and sometimes, more recently, I'd rather not bother. Why bother? It seems too conceptual – and worse – too bound up with invectives. Yet – I cannot forget and I don't want to. It's in my blood, my face my mother's voice it's in my voice my speech rhythms my dreams and memories it's the shape of my legs and though I am light skinned it is my features – my eyes and face shape... it must even be the way I sweat! Why it's damn near everything! and I feel it's my yearning for wide spaces – for the flat and nude plains. Yes, I've been denied. What a shame not to speak Blackfoot. It was my mother's first language – she'd talk it over the phone long distance – she'd speak it when she went home (the blood reserve in Southern Alberta) she even spoke it in my dreams but I never learned. All that talking denied me.

### **Weird, superstitious, unnatural – Imagine in this day and age!**

My mother talking: "Christopher's wife cries by his bed. His dead wife, she cries by his bed. He had to go to a medicine man to see what was happening. She committed suicide a couple years back, she must be restless." "My, imagine... What must it be like?" I say, "My that's something, weird." Weird? The word foreign to me as soon as I've said it. Weird? A shadow flits across my mother's eyes. How could that have come up? I recoil inside, I don't know the part of me that's said it. My stomach tingles. I feel tight. The word is dry, false – "weird". Of course, I remember, of course I know. "Weird" only a non-Indian would say that. Someone who doesn't know, who hasn't been raised to see that life is a continuous whole from flesh to spirit, that we're not as easily separated as some think. I knew that.

"Yea – that's good he went to see that medicine man," I say. I've been around too many people who don't see it that way, that easily. Spirits? They need proof, they are skeptical. One time I talked with some white friends for nearly two hours straight about ghosts. "Who knows? Ghosts might be real: sometimes there is proof," they said. They told me there are pictures now. Good, maybe now they will know. And that is where I learned to say "weird." Weird, superstitious, unnatural – Imagine, in this day and age.

### **The weeping was all of our pain – a collective wound**

I remember my great-grandfather Makwyapi in his tipi. Smelling the sweet grass, my mother telling me it was holy and not to touch his things. I never really got to know him. Makwyapi, "Wolf Old Man" his English was broken and he always spoke Blackfoot. He had a sweat\* lodge outside his house. He was a medicine man and once cured a man of face cancer by dreaming of a certain mixture of herbs and roots. This came to him in a dream. I grew up knowing about dreams and remedies, spirits – the still black nights on the plains. I attended my first sweat when I was sixteen, it was high in the mountains. We went to a lodge afterwards. This first sweat was so miraculous, so refreshing and so magical – it was as though God had appeared before me and walked about and danced. It reinstated my sense of the Marvelous and also a sense of sacredness. I cried inside that sweat, it seemed as though I could never stop crying as though my heart was being tugged at and finally torn loose inside my chest. Other people cried too. So much emotion is expressed in the sweat and in the medicine lodge. And the weird thing about it is – you don't really know what it is you're crying about. The emotions seem to come out of some primeval cavity – some lonesome half-remembered place. It seems when I cried it was more than an individual pain. The weeping was all of our pain – a collective wound – it is larger than each individual. In the sweat it seems as though we all remember a past – a collective presence – our past as Native people before being colonized and culturally liquidated.

### **Barrier between myself and my people**

At age seven I had a wild crush on a girl a year younger than myself that lasted a whole year. I would stare at her picture in the second grade year book and cry. I drew her pictures of dragons and gave them to her. It seemed a bit odd to me, but I wanted to marry her. I felt as

\*A sweat is a religious purification ceremony.

though I was the only girl who'd ever felt these things. Perhaps there had been a mistake. I decided it would be better to be a boy and I stayed awake at night praying to turn into one. If I was a boy it would be easier to be a super hero and to be president. Finally – I decided to remain a girl and make the best of it.

We moved and I left her behind – but the memory of that early, intense feeling stayed on. It seemed so natural and heartfelt and it scared me a little. I was already becoming aware of my emotions as a lesbian – as different.

That is one of the barriers between myself and the reserve. How to explain, who can I tell, should I tell anyone? I grew up with these people, my relatives, my cousins, my aunts and uncles – various friends. I grew up loving that land and always needing to return there. Three years ago, in '77, I lived there for two months. I went out to Babb and drank at the Indian bar, I went to sweats (not right after partying however – as you have to either give up drinking completely or wait four days after last imbibing before entering the sweat lodge). I'd chase horses – go get them to ride, I jogged on the plains (all the while watching for bulls which might chase me) and hung around the house – reading, watching television and cleaning. I felt the ennui of reserve life, the timelessness, I also sensed conservatism and a limitation. People expected me to be more tied to my parents than I am, to want to live close to them, to feel more homesick at the age of twenty for my mother and father. And yet sometimes I feel almost crippled by a homesickness inside me.

There is something sturdy and healthy about extended families, the way people care for each other, the way they depend upon and take care of one another. I feel lucky to have been touched by such a situation while growing up. But now, I would find that hard to live with. More than anything because it is patriarchal, women have a certain limited role (as do men), and I am gay. Perhaps in the old days, in some way or other I could have fit in there. But today, my lesbianism has become a barrier between myself and my people. What to say when my grandmother or aunt asks if I've met a boyfriend. The perennial lesbian problem – how to tell the folks and what to tell them.

It is hard to be around other people talking about their lives and not be able to talk about your own in the same way. It causes a false and painful separateness – which I'll have to live with and ignore until I know how and what to do otherwise.

### **You will return to the Indian way**

I lived at the North End for about a year. I was five. We had no running water so when we bathed we got water from a nearby river.

For a year I enjoyed the nearby hills where there are supposed to be spirits. Now the river is thick with pollution from a factory upstream, the grass has grown tall around the old house, my grandfather has been dead twelve years. Still, each year my family visits the reserve.

Once an uncle of mine came to me in a dream, he picked me up as though I was a child saying, "Apoyakee, Apoyakee when are you going to come home and take care of the little ones?" Apoyakee is my Blackfoot name given to me by my grandpa, Shade. It means, "Light or fair-haired woman", obviously given to me because of my light hair (I was blonde as a child, the only fair complected person in my family).

Off and on, I think of going back "home" to live for a good six to twelve months. Work, have a good time, learn Blackfoot, learn how to set up a sweat, how to open up a medicine bundle, maybe learn the handgame and some songs.

Five years ago I dreamt myself walking out of my home in Littleton and out to a flat, long desert. There, beneath a shelter of poles and sticks, an old Kainah woman sat, dressed in a kerchief and a long blue dress. Some strange looking pipes were being passed around, none of them were handed to me as none were quite right for me. These pipes were not holy or in any way recognizable to me as anything special. The old lady looked at me a long time, then she said, "You will return to the Indian way."

# "Gee, You Don't Seem Like An Indian From the Reservation"

## *Barbara Cameron*

One of the very first words I learned in my Lakota language was *wasicu* which designates white people. At that early age, my comprehension of *wasicu* was gained from observing and listening to my family discussing the *wasicu*. My grandmother always referred to white people as the "wasicu *sica*" with emphasis on *sica*, our word for terrible or bad. By the age of five I had seen one Indian man gunned down in the back by the police and was a silent witness to a gang of white teenage boys beating up an elderly Indian man. I'd hear stories of Indian ranch hands being "accidentally" shot by white ranchers. I quickly began to understand the *wasicu* menace my family spoke of.

My hatred for the *wasicu* was solidly implanted by the time I entered first grade. Unfortunately in first grade I became teacher's pet so my teacher had a fondness for hugging me which always repulsed me. I couldn't stand the idea of a white person touching me. Eventually I realized that it wasn't the white skin that I hated, but it was their culture of deceit, greed, racism, and violence.

During my first memorable visit to a white town, I was appalled that they thought of themselves as superior to my people. Their manner of living appeared devoid of life and bordered on hostility even for one another. They were separated from each other by their perfectly, politely fenced square plots "green lawn. The only lawns on my reservation were the lawns of the BIA\* officials or white christians. The white people always seemed so loud, obnoxious, and vulgar. And the white parents were either screaming at their kids, threatening them with some form of punishment or hitting them. After spending a day around white people, I was always happy to go back to the reservation where people followed a relaxed yet respectful code of relating with each other. The easy teasing and joking that were inherent with the Lakota were a welcome relief after a day with the plastic faces.

I vividly remember two occasions during my childhood in which I was cognizant of being an Indian. The first time was at about three years of age when my family took me to my first pow-wow. I kept asking my grandmother, "Where are the Indians? Where are the Indians? Are they going to have bows and arrows?" I was very curious and

\*Bureau of Indian Affairs.

strangely excited about the prospect of seeing real live Indians even though I myself was one. It's a memory that has remained with me through all these years because it's so full of the subtleties of my culture. There was a sweet wonderful aroma in the air from the dancers and from the traditional food booths. There were lots of grandmothers and grandfathers with young children running about. Pow-wows in the Plains usually last for three days, sometimes longer, with Indian people traveling from all parts of our country to dance, to share food and laughter, and to be with each other. I could sense the importance of our gathering times and it was the beginning of my awareness that my people are a great and different nation.

The second time in my childhood when I knew very clearly that I am Indian occurred when I was attending an all white (except for me) elementary school. During Halloween my friends and I went trick or treating. At one of the last stops, the mother knew all of the children except for me. She asked me to remove my mask so she could see who I was. After I removed my mask, she realized I was an Indian and quite cruelly told me so, refusing to give me the treats my friends had received. It was a stinging painful experience.

I told my mother about it the next evening after I tried to understand it. My mother was outraged and explained the realities of being an Indian in South Dakota. My mother paid a visit to the woman which resulted in their expressing a barrage of equal hatred for one another. I remember sitting in our pick-up hearing the intensity of the anger and feeling very sad that my mother had to defend her child to someone who wasn't worthy of her presence.

I spent a part of my childhood feeling great sadness and helplessness about how it seemed that Indians were open game for the white people, to kill, maim, beat up, insult, rape, cheat, or whatever atrocity the white people wanted to play with. There was also a rage and frustration that has not died. When I look back on reservation life it seems that I spent a great deal of time attending the funerals of my relatives or friends of my family. During one year I went to funerals of four murder victims. Most of my non-Indian friends have not seen a dead body or have not been to a funeral. Death was so common on the reservation that I did not understand the implications of the high death rate until after I moved away and was surprised to learn that I've seen more dead bodies than my friends will probably ever see in their lifetime.

Because of experiencing racial violence, I sometimes panic when I'm the only non-white in a roomful of whites, even if they are my closest friends; I wonder if I'll leave the room alive. The seemingly copacetic gay world of San Francisco becomes a mere dream after the panic

leaves. I think to myself that it's truly insane for me to feel the panic. I want to scream out my anger and disgust with myself for feeling distrustful of my white friends and I want to banish the society that has fostered those feelings of alienation. I wonder at the amount of assimilation which has affected me and how long my "Indianness" will allow me to remain in a city that is far removed from the lives of many Native Americans.

"Alienation" and "assimilation" are two common words used to describe contemporary Indian people. I've come to despise those two words because what leads to "alienation" and "assimilation" should not be so concisely defined. And I generally mistrust words that are used to define Native Americans and Brown People. I don't like being put under a magnifying glass and having cute liberal terms describe who I am. The "alienation" or "assimilation" that I manifest is often in how I speak. There isn't necessarily a third world language but there is an Indian way of talking that is an essential part of me. I like it, I love it, yet I deny it. I "save" it for when I'm around other Indians. It is a way of talking that involves "Indian humor" which I know for sure non-Indian people would not necessarily understand.

*Articulate. Articulate.* I've heard that word used many times to describe third world people. White people seem so surprised to find brown people who can speak fluent english and are even perhaps educated. We then become "articulate." I think I spend a lot of time being articulate with white people. Or as one person said to me a few years ago, "Gee, you don't seem like an Indian from the reservation."

I often read about the dilemmas of contemporary Indians caught between the white and Indian worlds. For most of us, it is an uneasy balance to maintain. Sometimes some of us are not so successful with it. Native Americans have a very high suicide rate.

*When I was about 20, I dreamt of myself at the age of 25-26, standing at a place on my reservation, looking to the North, watching a glorious, many-colored horse galloping toward me from the sky. My eyes were riveted and attracted to the beauty and overwhelming strength of the horse. The horse's eyes were staring directly into mine, hypnotizing me and holding my attention. Slowly from the East, an eagle was gliding toward the horse. My attention began to be drawn toward the calm of the eagle but I still did not want to lose sight of the horse. Finally the two met with the eagle sailing into the horse causing it to disintegrate. The eagle flew gently on.*

I take this prophetic dream as an analogy of my balance between the white (horse) and Indian (eagle) world. Now that I am 26, I find that I've gone as far into my exploration of the white world as I want. It doesn't mean that I'm going to run off to live in a tipi. It simply means

that I'm not interested in pursuing a society that uses analysis, research, and experimentation to concretize their vision of cruel destinies for those who are not bastards of the Pilgrims; a society with arrogance rising, moon in oppression, and sun in destruction.

Racism is not easy for me to write about because of my own racism toward other people of color, and because of a complex set of "racisms" within the Indian community. At times animosity exists between half-breed, full-blood, light-skinned Indians, dark-skinned Indians, and non-Indians who attempt to pass as Indians. The U.S. government has practiced for many years its divisiveness in the Indian community by instilling and perpetuating these Indian vs. Indian tactics. Native Americans are the foremost group of people who continuously fight against pre-meditated cultural genocide.

I've grown up with misconceptions about Blacks, Chicanos, and Asians. I'm still in the process of trying to eliminate my racist pictures of other people of color. I know most of *my* images of other races come from television, books, movies, newspapers, and magazines. Who can pinpoint exactly where racism comes from? There are certain political dogmas that are excellent in their "analysis" of racism and how it feeds the capitalist system. To intellectually understand that it is wrong or politically incorrect to be racist leaves me cold. A lot of poor or working class white and brown people are just as racist as the "capitalist pig." We are *all* continually pumped with gross and inaccurate images of everyone else and we *all* pump it out. I don't think there are easy answers or formulas. My personal attempts at eliminating my racism have to start at the base level of those mind-sets that inhibit my relationships with people.

Racism among third world people is an area that needs to be discussed and dealt with honestly. We form alliances loosely based on the fact that we have a common oppressor, yet we do not have a commitment to talk about our own fears and misconceptions about each other. I've noticed that liberal, consciousness-raised white people tend to be incredibly polite to third world people at parties or other social situations. It's almost as if they make a point to SHAKE YOUR HAND or to introduce themselves and then run down all the latest right-on third world or Native American books they've just read. On the other hand it's been my experience that if there are several third world gay people at a party, we make a point of avoiding each other, and spend our time talking to the whites to show how sophisticated and intelligent we are. I've always wanted to introduce myself to other third world people but wondered how I would introduce myself or what would I say. There are so many things I would want to say, except sometimes I don't want to remember I'm Third World or Native American. I don't want to

remember sometimes because it means recognizing that we're outlaws.

At the Third World Gay Conference in October 1979, the Asian and Native American people in attendance felt the issues affecting us were not adequately included in the workshops. Our representation and leadership had minimal input which resulted in a skimpy educational process about our struggles. The conference glaringly pointed out to us the narrow definition held by some people that third world means black people only. It was a depressing experience to sit in the lobby of Harambee House with other Native Americans and Asians, feeling removed from other third world groups with whom there is supposed to be this automatic solidarity and empathy. The Indian group sat in my motel room discussing and exchanging our experiences within the third world context. We didn't spend much time in workshops conducted by other third world people because of feeling unwelcomed at the conference and demoralized by having an invisible presence. What's worse than being invisible among your own kind?

It is of particular importance to us as third world gay people to begin a serious interchange of sharing and educating ourselves about each other. We not only must struggle with the racism and homophobia of straight white america, but must often struggle with the homophobia that exists within our third world communities. Being third world doesn't always connote a political awareness or activism. I've met a number of third world and Native American lesbians who've said they're just into "being themselves", and that politics has no meaning in their lives. I agree that everyone is entitled to "be themselves" but in a society that denies respect and basic rights to people because of their ethnic background, I feel that individuals cannot idly sit by and allow themselves to be co-opted by the dominant society. I don't know what moves a person to be politically active or to attempt to raise the quality of life in our world. I only know what motivates my political responsibility... the death of Anna Mae Aquash – Native American freedom fighter – "mysteriously" murdered by a bullet in the head; Raymond Yellow Thunder – forced to dance naked in front of a white VFW club in Nebraska – murdered; Rita Silk-Nauni – imprisoned for life for defending her child; my dear friend Mani Lucas-Papago – shot in the back of the head outside of a gay bar in Phoenix. The list could go on and on. My Native American History, recent and past, moves me to continue as a political activist.

And in the white gay community there is rampant racism which is never adequately addressed or acknowledged. My friend Chrystos from the Menominee Nation gave a poetry reading in May 1980, at a Bay Area feminist bookstore. Her reading consisted of poems and journal entries in which she wrote honestly from her heart about the

many "isms" and contradictions in most of our lives. Chrystos' bluntly revealing observations on her experiences with the white-lesbian-feminist-community are similar to mine and are probably echoed by other lesbians of color.

Her honesty was courageous and should be representative of the kind of forum our community needs to openly discuss mutual racism. A few days following Chrystos' reading, a friend who was in the same bookstore overheard a white lesbian denounce Chrystos' reading as anti-lesbian and racist.

A few years ago, a white lesbian telephoned me requesting an interview, explaining that she was taking Native American courses at a local university, and that she needed data for her paper on gay Native Americans. I agreed to the interview with the idea that I would be helping a "sister" and would also be able to educate her about Native American struggles. After we completed the interview, she began a diatribe on how sexist Native Americans are, followed by a questioning session in which I was to enlighten her mind about why Native Americans are so sexist. I attempted to rationally answer her inanely racist and insulting questions, although my inner response was to tell her to remove herself from my house. Later it became very clear how I had been manipulated as a sounding board for her ugly and distorted views about Native Americans. Her arrogance and disrespect were characteristic of the racist white people in South Dakota. If I tried to point it out, I'm sure she would have vehemently denied her racism.

During the Brigg's Initiative scare, I was invited to speak at a rally to represent Native American solidarity against the initiative. The person who spoke prior to me expressed a pro-Bakke sentiment which the audience booed and hissed. His comments left the predominantly white audience angry and in disruption. A white lesbian stood up demanding that a third world person address the racist comments he had made. The MC, rather than taking responsibility for restoring order at the rally, realized that I was the next speaker and I was also T-H-I-R-D-W-O-R-L-D!! I refused to address the remarks of the previous speaker because of the attitudes of the MC and the white lesbian that only third world people are responsible for speaking out against racism. *It is inappropriate for progressive or liberal white people to expect warriors in brown armor to eradicate racism.* There must be co-responsibility from people of color and white people to equally work on this issue. It is not just MY responsibility to point out and educate about racist activities and beliefs.

Redman, redskin, savage, heathen, injun, american indian, first americans, indigenous peoples, natives, amerindian, native american, nigger, negro, black, wet back, greaser, mexican, spanish, latin,

hispanic, chicano, chink, oriental, asian, disadvantaged, special interest group, minority, third world, fourth world, people of color, illegal aliens – oh yes about them, will the U.S. government recognize that the Founding Fathers (you know George Washington and all those guys) are this country's first illegal aliens.

*We are named by others and we are named by ourselves.*

#### Epilogue . . .

Following writing most of this, I went to visit my home in South Dakota. It was my first visit in eight years. I kept putting off my visit year after year because I could not tolerate the white people there and the ruralness and poverty of the reservation. And because in the eight years since I left home, I came out as a lesbian. My visit home was overwhelming. Floods and floods of locked memories broke. I rediscovered myself there in the hills, on the prairies, in the sky, on the road, in the quiet nights, among the stars, listening to the distant yelps of coyotes, walking on Lakota earth, seeing Bear Butte, looking at my grandparents' cragged faces, standing under wakiyan, smelling the Paha Sapa (Black Hills), and being with my precious circle of relatives.

My sense of time changed, my manner of speaking changed, and a certain freedom with myself returned.

I was sad to leave but recognized that a significant part of myself has never left and never will. And that part is what gives me strength – the strength of my people's enduring history and continuing belief in the sovereignty of our lives.

# “ . . . And Even Fidel Can’t Change That!”

## *Aurora Levins Morales*

### 1

Cherríe, you asked me to write about internationalism, and at first it made sense. . . . I'm a latin woman in the United States, closely involved with Latin American movements in the rest of the continent. I *should* write about the connection. But when I tried, all I could think was: No, write about the separation.

### 2

For me the point of terror, the point of denial is the New York Puerto Rican. My mother was born in New York in 1930, raised in Spanish Harlem and the Bronx. I represent the generation of return. I was born deep in the countryside of Puerto Rico and except for four years when I was very young, lived there until I was 13. For my mother, the Barrio is safety, warmth. For me, it's the fear of racist violence that clipped her tongue of all its open vowels, into crisp, imitation British. She once told me her idea of hell was to be a single mother of two children under five in the South Bronx. I'm afraid of ever knowing what she meant.

Where I grew up, I fought battles to prove I was Puerto Rican with the kids who called me "Americanita," but I stayed on the safe side of that line: Caribbean island, not Portah Ricah; exotic tropical blossom, not spic — living halfway in the skin and separating myself from the dark, bad city kids in Nueva York.

### 3

The point of terror, of denial, the point of hatred is the tight dress stretched across my grandmother's big breasts, the coquettish, well made-up smile: grandmother, aunt and great-aunts all decked out in sex, talking about how I'm pretty, talking about how men are only good for one thing, hating sex and gloating over the hidden filthiness in everything, looking me over, in a hurry to find me a boyfriend, and in the same breath: "you can't travel alone! You don't know what men are like. . . . *they only want one thing. . . .*" Women teaching women our bodies are disgusting and dirty, our desires are obscene, men are all sick and want only one sickening thing from us. Saying, you've got to learn how to hold out on 'em just enough to get what you want. It's the only item you can put on the market, so better make it go far, and when you have to deliver, lie down and grit your teeth and bear it, because there's no escape.

## 4

And yet, I tell you, I love those women for facing up to the ugliness there. No romance, no roses and moonlight and pure love. You say pure love to one of these women and they snort and ask you what the man has between his legs and is it pure? I love these women for the bitch sessions that pool common knowledge and tell the young wife: "Oh, yes, the first time he cheated on me I tried that, too, but he just beat me. Listen, don't give him the satisfaction. The next time . . ." These women don't believe in the sanctity of the marriage bond, the inviolable privacy of the husband-wife unit. The cattiness is mixed with the information, tips. The misery is communal.

## 5

Claustrophobia. A reality I can't make a dent in . . . because it's the misery that's communal. The resistance is individual and frowned upon. It rocks the boat. How many times has a Latin woman stood up for me in private, then stabbed me in the back when the moment comes for the support that counts. How many times has a Latin woman used me to bitch to and then gone running to men for approval, leaving me in the lurch. The anger is real and deep: You have forced me to turn out of my own culture to find allies worthy of the name; you have forced me into a room full of Anglo women who nod sympathetically and say: "Latin men are soooo much worse than Anglo men . . . Why the last time I was in Mexico, you couldn't walk down the streets without some guy . . . It must be so hard for you to be a Latin feminist . . ." And not to betray you in the face of their racism, I betray myself, and in the end, you, by not saying: It's not the men who exile me . . . it's the women. I don't trust the women.

## 6

Points of terror. Points of denial. Repeat the story that it was my grandmother who went to look at apartments. Light skinned, fine, black hair: I'm Italian, she would tell them, keeping the dark-skinned husband, keeping the daughters out of sight. I have pretended that pain, that shame, that anger never touched me, does not stain my skin. She could pass for Italian. She kept her family behind her. I can pass for anyone. Behind me stands my grandmother working at the bra and girdle factory, speaking with an accent, lying to get an apartment in Puerto Ricanless neighborhoods.

## 7

Piri Thomas' book *Down These Mean Streets* followed me around for years, in the corner of my eye on bus terminal bookracks. Finally, in a gritted teeth desperation I faced the damn thing and said "OK, tell me."

I sweated my way through it in two nights: Gang fights, knifings, robberies, smack, prison. It's the standard Puerto Rican street story, except *he* lived. The junkies could be my younger brothers. The prisoners could be them. I could be the prostitute, the welfare mother, the sister and lover of junkies, the child of alcoholics. There is nothing but circumstance and good English, nothing but my mother marrying into the middle class, between me and that life.

## 8

The image stays with me of my mother's family fleeing their puerto-ricanness, the first spics on the block, behind them, the neighborhoods collapsing into slums. There was a war, she told me. The enemy was only a step behind. I borrow the pictures from my other family, the nightmares of my Jewish ancestry, and imagine them fleeing through the streets. My mother never went back to look. This year she saw on television the ruins of the Tiffany Street of her childhood, unrecognizable, bombarded by poverty and urban renewal into an image of some European city: 1945. Like the Jews, like many people, the place she could have returned to has been destroyed.

## 9

I saw a baby once, the same age as my fat, crowing baby brother, then six months old. I was twelve, and under the influence of our Seventh Day Adventist teacher some of the girls in the seventh grade took up a collection for two poor families in the neighborhood. We bought them each one bag of groceries. This baby was just a little bit of skin stretched over a tiny skeleton. It hardly moved. It didn't even cry. It just lay there. The woman's husband had left her. The oldest boy, he was 13 or 14, worked picking coffee to help out. When we came the younger kids hid in the mother's skirts and she just stood there, crying and crying.

I ran straight home when we left and the first thing I did was to find my brother and hug him very tightly. Then I spent the rest of the afternoon feeding him.

If something had happened to my father, the ghost over my mother's shoulder would have caught up with us. Papi was our middle class passport. I grew up a professor's daughter, on the road to college, speaking good English. I can pass for anyone. Behind me stands my grandmother. Behind me lie the mean streets. Behind me my little brother is nothing but skin and skeleton.

## 10

Writing this I am browner than I have ever been. Spanish ripples on my tongue and I *want* the accent. I walk through the Mission drinking in the sounds. I go into La Borinquena and buy *yautia* and *platano* for

dinner. Facing up to the terror, ending the denial, refusing to obey the rule "Don't talk bad about your own people in front of anyone else." I have never learned to dance salsa. My body goes rigid when the music plays. Oh yes, I tap my feet, and now and then I do a few steps, swing around the room with someone who doesn't know more than I do . . . but if I'm in a Latin scene I freeze. I can't make my hips fluid or keep my feet from tripping. It's the perversion of sexuality that frightens me. It's the way the women around me exude a sexiness that has nothing to do with the heart. Of course Latin Women love as well as any other women . . . but while the chilliest Anglo-Saxon repression of sex pretends it simply doesn't exist, Latin repression says it's a filthy fact of life, use it for what it's worth . . . shake it in his face, wear it as a decoy. It's all over the floor and it's cold and savage. It's the hatred of the powerless, turned crooked.

## 11

Sitting in a kitchen in oh-so-white New Hampshire with old friends, mother and daughter, Ceci says "It takes three generations. If you resolve your relationship with your mother you'll both change, and your daughter will have it easier, but *her* daughter will be raised differently. In the third generation the daughters are free." I'm not thinking then of this essay, but days later when I sit down again to work, the phrase keeps ringing: *In the third generation the daughters are free.*

## 12

*"Don't you think I've swallowed my mouthful of blood? It's different for a man. You're too stubborn . . . you've always wanted your own way. It was this way for my grandmother, it was this way for my mother, it was this way for me . . . because this is the way it is. God made men and women different and even Fidel can't change that! Anything is better than being alone"*

Older woman in *Portrait of Teresa*  
Cuban film, 1979

My mother and I work to unravel the knot. The task is daily: bloody, terrifying and necessary, and filled with joy.

## 13

The relationship between mother and daughter stands at the center of what I fear most in our culture. Heal that wound and we change the world.

*A revolution capable of healing our wounds.* If we're the ones who can imagine it, if we're the ones who dream about it, if we're the ones who need it most, then no one else can do it.

*We're the ones.*

# I Walk in the History of My People

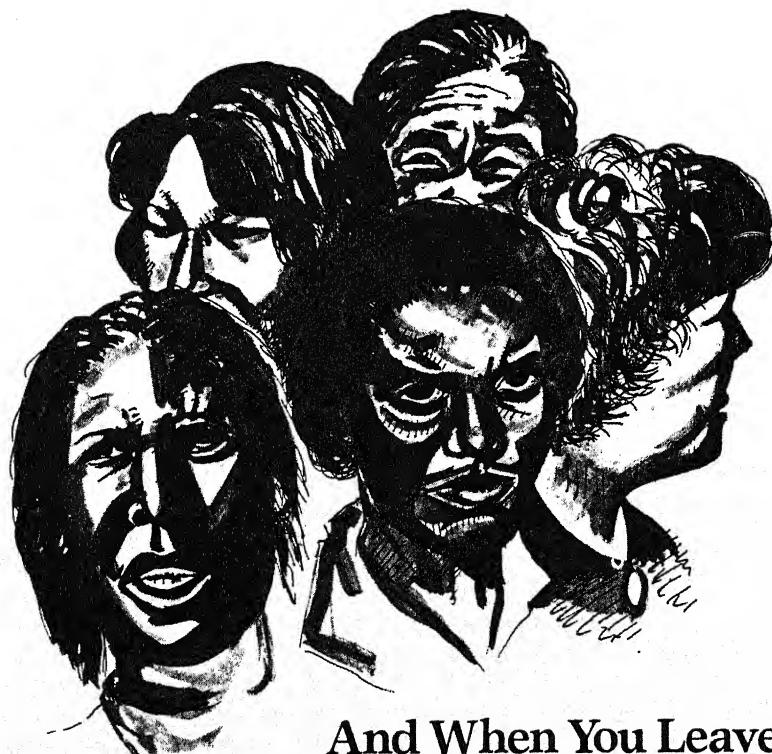
## *Chrystos*

There are women locked in my joints  
for refusing to speak to the police  
My red blood full of those  
arrested, in flight, shot  
My tendons stretched brittle with anger  
do not look like white roots of peace  
In my marrow are hungry faces who live on land the whites don't want  
In my marrow women who walk 5 miles every day for water  
In my marrow the swollen faces of my people who are not allowed  
to hunt  
to move  
to be

In the scars on my knee you can see children torn from their families  
bludgeoned into government schools  
You can see through the pins in my bones that we are prisoners  
of a long war

My knee is so badly wounded no one will look at it  
The pus of the past oozes from every pore  
The infection has gone on for at least 300 years  
My sacred beliefs have been made pencils, names of cities, gas stations  
My knee is wounded so badly that I limp constantly  
Anger is my crutch  
I hold myself upright with it  
My knee is wounded  
see  
How I Am Still Walking





**And When You Leave,  
Take Your Pictures With You**  
**Racism in the Women's Movement**



"The reason racism is a feminist issue is easily explained by the inherent definition of feminism. Feminism is the political theory and practice to free *all* women: women of color, working-class women, poor women, physically challenged women, lesbians, old women, as well as white economically privileged heterosexual women. Anything less than this is not feminism, but merely female self-aggrandizement."<sup>\*</sup>

Barbara Smith

We women of color are the veterans of a class and color war that is still escalating in the feminist movement. This section attempts to describe in tangible ways how, under the name of feminism, white women of economic and educational privilege have used that privilege at the expense of Third World women. Although the original intent of including a section in this anthology specifically about racism in the movement was to make a *connection* with white women, it *feels* now more like a separation.

Things have gotten worse. In academic and cultural circles, Third World women have become the subject matter of many literary and artistic endeavors by white women, and yet we are refused access to the pen, the publishing house, the galleries, and the classroom. "Only for the sake of art/Millicent, do you rise/tall from the ink" (Daniels). Our traditional native cultures are ripped off from us and are displayed as the artifacts of "primitive" peoples by white Bohemian liberated women headed for the West Coast. In leftist feminist circles we are dealt with as a political issue, rather than as flesh and blood human beings. We represent the party line, but the truth is, "We're not as happy as we look/on their/wall" (Carrillo). We have had it with the word "*outreach*" referring to our joining racist white women's organizations. The question keeps coming up—where exactly then, is *in*? It smells like white to us. We have had it.

Repeatedly acknowledged throughout this section and infusing the entire contents of this anthology is our understanding that theory

<sup>\*</sup>From a talk given at the closing session at the NWSA conference, May 1979; appeared in *Frontiers*, Vol. V, No. 1, 1980.

alone can not wipe out racism. We do not experience racism, whether directed at ourselves or others, theoretically. Neither do white women.

How does one then emotionally come to terms with racism? None of us in this book can challenge others to confront questions that we ourselves have not confronted. How do we deal with the ways in which this diseased society has infused our very blood systems? How do we take personal responsibility for our own racist actions and assumptions?

As Third World women we clearly have a different relationship to racism than white women, but all of us are born into an environment where racism exists. Racism affects all of our lives, but it is only white women who can "afford" to remain oblivious to these effects. The rest of us have had it breathing or bleeding down our necks.

But you work with what you have, whatever your skin color. Racism is societal and institutional. It implies the power to implement racist ideology. Women of color do not have such power, but white women are born with it and the greater their economic privilege, the greater their power. This is how white middle class women emerge among feminist ranks as the greatest propagators of racism in the movement. Rather than using the privilege they have to crumble the institutions that house the source of their own oppression – sexism, along with racism – they oftentimes deny their privilege in the form of "downward mobility," or keep it intact in the form of guilt. Guilt is *not* a feeling. It is an intellectual mask to a feeling. Fear is a feeling – fear of losing one's power, fear of being accused, fear of a loss of status, control, knowledge. Fear is real. Possibly this is the emotional, non-theoretical place from which serious anti-racist work among white feminists can begin.

The women writing here are committed feminists. We are challenging white feminists to be accountable for their racism because at the base we still *want* to believe that they really *want* freedom for *all* of us. The letter from Audre Lorde to Mary Daly appearing in this section is an example to all of us of how we as feminists can criticize each other. It is an act of love to take someone at her word, to expect the most out of a woman who calls herself a feminist – to challenge her as you yourself wish to be challenged.

As women, on some level we all know oppression. We must use this knowledge, as Rosario Morales suggests, to "identify, understand, and feel with the oppressed as a way out of the morass of racism and guilt." . . . For "We are all in the same boat."

And it is sinking fast.

# And When You Leave, Take Your Pictures With You

*Jo Carrillo*

Our white sisters  
radical friends  
love to own pictures of us  
sitting at a factory machine  
wielding a machete  
in our bright bandanas  
holding brown yellow black red children  
reading books from literacy campaigns  
holding machine guns bayonets bombs knives  
Our white sisters  
radical friends  
should think  
again.

Our white sisters  
radical friends  
love to own pictures of us  
walking to the fields in hot sun  
with straw hat on head if brown  
bandana if black  
in bright embroidered shirts  
holding brown yellow black red children  
reading books from literacy campaigns  
smiling.

Our white sisters radical friends  
should think again.  
No one smiles  
at the beginning of a day spent  
digging for souvenir chunks of uranium  
of cleaning up after  
our white sisters  
radical friends

And when our white sisters  
radical friends see us

in the flesh  
not as a picture they own,  
they are not quite as sure  
if  
they like us as much.  
We're not as happy as we look  
on  
their  
wall.

# Beyond the Cliffs of Abiquiu\*

*Jo Carrillo*

She calls you a rock.  
He calls you a rock.  
They both agree that you  
are unworthy  
of anything  
but a slow death.

Her skin is white;  
more parched than  
the land she hates.  
Silver fades into her arm  
turquoise matches  
nothing  
more than her  
eyes  
but she wears it.

two cliffs little trees lots of rocks  
is this land nothing but a rock? she asks  
while gracefully walking back to her  
MG

OH, yes I know, I live here  
in this desert  
and let me tell you . . .!  
The whole place is  
parched.  
Just one great big rock.

Let me see,  
do I have time to put on my  
my  
my  
squash blossom.

\*My poem to the land that, along with South Dakota, is a "proposed National Sacrifice" area for energy (uranium, coal, coal gasification, etc.).

It's Authentic Navajo Indian Laguna Pueblo  
design from  
Buen Muir Indian Trading Post  
completely  
staffed  
by  
whites  
except of course  
for the janitor.

How can it be  
that the mines  
the uranium cancer causing dangerous radon gas emitting mines  
are worked by Navajos and other assorted  
types  
and the trading posts  
are all  
all  
worked over  
by whites?

The mines belong to them  
too;  
don't enjoy the work as much?  
Rather sell Authentic Navajo Hopi Zuni Indian made  
real  
live  
Laguna Santa Ana Santo Domingos?

It's  
less  
of a mess.

Oh, those Indians.  
They are  
all  
just  
drunks.  
Can't even go through Gallup  
without seeing at least  
at least  
at least  
ten of them.

Oh, let's step into this Navajo rug shop  
while we're here.

Bet you don't have *that*  
in San Francisco Los Angeles New York  
Albuquerque.

They are really lovely rugs  
my whole house is done  
in  
Navajo rugs  
it's adobe  
in Corrales  
by the river  
lots of  
rich  
whites  
with Authentic Navajo Hopi Zuni Indian made real live  
Laguna Santa Ana Santo Domingo  
artifacts.

There is a village  
over  
that  
hill.

# I Don't Understand Those Who Have Turned Away From Me

## *Chrystos*

5:23 am – May 1980

I am afraid of white people Never admitted that before deep secret

I think about all the white women I knew in San Francisco Women with Master's degrees from Stanford University & cars that daddy bought, women with straight white teeth & clear skins from thousands of years of proper nutrition They chose to be poor They were quite convincing in the role of oppressed victim I want to tell them to go down to Fillmore & Haight & tell somebody about it Tell Jim my old landlord who picked cotton since he was 6 moved here for a better life lost his hearing & his teeth & his hair from working in the shipyards for 35 years The constant vibration of his drill on the metal literally shook his teeth out He went bald from always wearing a safety helmet He can't hear after years of that racket He worked so hard for 35 years & he is still poor They live on Webster street, across from the projects The house is an old Victorian which will not be paid off unless he lives to be 89 which is unlikely.

I read the funniest line in a health book yesterday It said, that for some "unknown" reason, more black people had hypertension than white people Not funny No mystery Most Indian people don't usually live long enough to even GET hypertension All the deaths I carry so heavily Faces I knew Many murdered in Phoenix by whites outside a bar whites who still have not gone to trial Ron dying of pneumonia I still mourn him death None of my relatives has a degree from Stanford Neither did Jim So those poor white girls are still suffering mightily in my old home town of San Francisco

It did not help that it occurred to me that no amount of education was going to improve my lot in life if I didn't also change my attitude about the society I still think that 98% of what happens – liberal, conservative or radical lesbian separatist is: bullshit My attitude is all I own so I quit school

All the schools & crazy houses I was in were simply brainwashing & most of the feminist movement that I worked so hard to be a part of was propaganda This is heresy but it held no solution for me Surely Jane suffers oppression on her job because she is a woman All the problems and issues which feminism raises are valid & important It simply does not give me any answers for correct behavior in my own

life Certainly I won't obey that lesbian mafia nonsense that one must dress in a certain way or cut off one's hair to be real Those are all the most superficial rules silly I no longer believe that feminism is a tool which can eliminate racism – or even promote better understanding between different races & kinds of women I have felt less understanding between different races & from many lesbian women than I do from some straight people At least their heterosexual indifference allows me more freedom to be myself I felt so much stricture & censorship from lesbians I was supposed to be a carpenter to prove I was a real dyke My differences were sloughed over None of them came to a pow wow or an AIM\* fundraiser to see about *me* Above all I could not enjoy & love being a woman Jane commented when I first met her that she didn't care for most lesbians because they didn't like women didn't like themselves Of course it is extremely difficult to like oneself in a culture which thinks you are a disease

Many of the lesbians I knew seemed to throw off the outer trappings of their culture & were very vocal in criticizing it Yet, they had no joy, no new roads Night after night in endless picky meetings discussing everyone's inadequacies & faults & the harm which men do or night after night in dreary body shop bars drinking themselves into a stupor I worked so hard as part of a local women's coffeeshop & bookstore, harder than I've ever worked I ordered for the kitchen, & the art shows, did shifts, brought flowers, cleaned, met the pest man & phone man, did entertainment, washed a million coffee cups Recently someone told me that a young lesbian whose parents have given her a law practice, commented that she remembered me I didn't work she said all I did was talk to people I remember her too she was one of the thousands of women whose names & faces I memorized & tried to understand only to have them disappear after 3 months or whenever they found a lover After 3½ years I had so little left of myself so many bitter memories of women who disrespected me & others A woman who called herself a communist but supported capitalist enterprises of women, rather than our brave collective worker-owned effort The lies, pretensions, the snobbery & cliquishness The racism which bled through every moment at every level The terrifying & useless struggle to be accepted The awful gossip, bitchiness, backbiting & jealousy The gross lack of love

I left the women's movement utterly drained I have no interest in returning My dreams of crossing barriers to true understanding were false Most of the white women I thought I was close to want nothing to do with me now Perhaps white women are so rarely loyal because

\*American Indian Movement.

they do not have to be There are thousands of them to pick up & discard No responsibility to others The bathing beauties They want the status of reality & respect without labor Respect us simply because we exist Give us what we want now My bitterness distorts my words

I don't understand those who turned away from me

# Asian Pacific American Women and Feminism

*Mitsuye Yamada*

Most of the Asian Pacific American women I know agree that we need to make ourselves more visible by speaking out on the condition of our sex and race and on certain political issues which concern us. Some of us feel that visibility through the feminist perspective is the only logical step for us. However, this path is fraught with problems which we are unable to solve among us, because in order to do so, we need the help and cooperation of the white feminist leaders, the women who coordinate programs, direct women's buildings, and edit women's publications throughout the country. Women's organizations tell us they would like to have us "join" them and give them "input." These are the better ones; at least they know we exist and feel we might possibly have something to say of interest to them, but every time I read or speak to a group of people about the condition of my life as an Asian Pacific woman, it is as if I had never spoken before, as if I were speaking to a brand new audience of people who had never known an Asian Pacific woman who is other than the passive, sweet etc. stereotype of the "Oriental" woman.

When Third World women are asked to speak representing our racial or ethnic group, we are expected to move, charm or entertain, but not to educate in ways that are threatening to our audiences. We speak to audiences that sift out those parts of our speech (if what we say does not fit the image they have of us), come up to shake our hands with "That was lovely my dear, just lovely," and go home with the same mind set they come in with. No matter what we say or do, the stereotype still hangs on. I am weary of starting from scratch each time I speak or write, as if there were no history behind us, of hearing that among the women of color, Asian women are the least political, or the least oppressed, or the most polite. It is too bad not many people remember that one of the two persons in Seattle who stood up to contest the constitutionality of the Evacuation Order in 1942 was a young Japanese American woman. As individuals and in groups, we Asian Pacific women have been (more intensively than ever in the past few years) active in community affairs and speaking and writing about our activities. From the highly political writings published in *Asian Women* in 1971 (incisive and trenchant articles, poems and articles), to more recent voices from the Basement Workshop in New

York City to Unbound Feet in San Francisco, as well as those Asian Pacific women showcased at the Asian Pacific Women's Conferences in New York, Hawaii and California this year, these all tell us we *have* been active and vocal. And yet, we continue to hear, "Asian women are of course traditionally not attuned to being political," as if most other women are; or that Asian women are too happily bound to their traditional roles as mothers and wives, as if the same cannot be said of a great number of white American women among us.

When I read in *Plexus* recently that at a Workshop for Third World women in San Francisco, Cherrie Moraga exploded with "What each of us needs to do about what we don't know is to go look for it," I felt like standing up and cheering her. She was speaking at the Women's Building to a group of white sisters who were saying, in essence, "it is *your* responsibility as Third World women to teach *us*." If the majority culture know so little about us, it must be *our* problem, they seem to be telling us; the burden of teaching is on us. I do not want to be unfair; I know individual women and some women's groups that have taken on the responsibility of teaching themselves through reaching out to women of color, but such gestures by the majority of women's groups are still tentatively made because of the sometimes touchy reaction of women who are always being asked to be "tokens" at readings and workshops.

Earlier this year, when a group of Asian Pacific American women gathered together in San Francisco poet Nellie Wong's home to talk about feminism, I was struck by our general agreement on the subject of feminism as *an ideal*. We all believed in equality for women. We agreed that it is important for each of us to know what it means to be a woman in our society, to know the historical and psychological forces that have shaped and are shaping our thoughts which in turn determine the directions of our lives. We agreed that feminism means a commitment to making changes in our own lives and a conviction that as women we have the equipment to do so. One by one, as we sat around the table and talked (we women of all ages ranging from our early twenties to the mid-fifties, single and married, mothers and lovers, straight women and lesbians), we knew what it was we wanted out of feminism, and what it was supposed to mean to us. For women to achieve equality in our society, we agreed, we must continue to work for a common goal.

But there was a feeling of disappointment in that living room toward the women's movement as it stands today. One young woman said she had made an effort to join some women's groups with high expectations but came away disillusioned because these groups were not receptive to the issues that were important to her as an Asian woman.

Women in these groups, were, she said "into pushing their own issues" and were no different from the other organizations that imposed opinions and goals on their members rather than having them shaped by the needs of the members in the organizations. Some of the other women present said that they felt the women's organizations with feminist goals are still "a middle-class women's thing." This pervasive feeling of mistrust toward the women in the movement is fairly representative of a large group of women who live in the psychological place we now call Asian Pacific America. A movement that fights sexism in the social structure must deal with racism, and we had hoped the leaders in the women's movement would be able to see the parallels in the lives of the women of color and themselves, and would "join" us in our struggle and give us "input."

It should not be difficult to see that Asian Pacific women need to affirm our own culture while working within it to change it. Many of the leaders in the women's organizations today had moved naturally from the civil rights politics of the 60's to sexual politics, while very few of the Asian Pacific women who were involved in radical politics during the same period have emerged as leaders in these same women's organizations. Instead they have become active in groups promoting ethnic identity, most notably ethnic studies in universities, ethnic theater groups or ethnic community agencies. This doesn't mean that we have placed our loyalties on the side of ethnicity over womanhood. The two are not at war with one another; we shouldn't have to sign a "loyalty oath" favoring one over the other. However, women of color are often made to feel that we must make a choice between the two.

If I have more recently put my energies into the Pacific Asian American Center (a job center for Asians established in 1975, the only one of its kind in Orange County, California) and the Asian Pacific Women's Conferences (the first of its kind in our history), it is because the needs in these areas are so great. I have thought of myself as a feminist first, but my ethnicity cannot be separated from my feminism.

Through the women's movement, I have come to truly appreciate the meaning of my mother's life and the lives of immigrant women like her. My mother, at nineteen years of age, uprooted from her large extended family, was brought to this country to bear and raise four children alone. Once here, she found that her new husband who had been here as a student for several years prior to their marriage was a bachelor-at-heart and had no intention of changing his lifestyle. Stripped of the protection and support of her family, she found the responsibilities of raising us alone in a strange country almost intolerable during those early years. I thought for many years that my

mother did not love us because she often spoke of suicide as an easy way out of her miseries. I know now that for her to have survived "just for the sake" of her children took great strength and determination.

If I digress it is because I, a second generation Asian American woman who grew up believing in the American Dream, have come to know who I am through understanding the nature of my mother's experience; I have come to see connections in our lives as well as the lives of many women like us, and through her I have become more sensitive to the needs of Third World women throughout the world. We need not repeat our past histories; my daughters and I need not merely survive with strength and determination. We can, through collective struggle, live fuller and richer lives. My politics as a woman are deeply rooted in my immigrant parent's and my own past.

Not long ago at one of my readings a woman in the audience said she was deeply moved by my "beautifully tragic but not bitter camp poems which were apparently written long ago,"\* but she was distressed to hear my poem "To A Lady." "Why are you, at this late date, so angry, and why are you taking it so personally?" she said. "We need to look to the future and stop wallowing in the past so much." I responded that this poem is *not* at all about the past. I am talking about what is happening to us right now, about our nonsupport of each other, about our noncaring about each other, about not seeing connections between racism and sexism in our lives. As a child of immigrant parents, as a woman of color in a white society and as a woman in a patriarchal society, what is personal to me is political.

These are the connections we expected our white sisters to see. It should not be too difficult, we feel, for them to see why being a feminist activist is more dangerous for women of color. They should be able to see that political views held by women of color are often misconstrued as being personal rather than ideological. Views critical of the system held by a person in an "out group" are often seen as expressions of personal angers against the dominant society. (If they hate it so much here, why don't they go back?) Many lesbians I know have felt the same kind of frustration when they supported unpopular causes regarded by their critics as vindictive expressions to "get back" at the patriarchal system. They too know the disappointments of having their intentions misinterpreted.

In the 1960's when my family and I belonged to a neighborhood church, I became active in promoting the Fair Housing Bill, and one of my church friends said to me, "Why are you doing this to us? Haven't

\**Camp Notes and Other Poems* by Mitsuye Yamada (San Francisco: Shameless Hussy Press) 1976.

you and your family been happy with us in our church? Haven't we treated you well?" I knew then that I was not really part of the church at all in the eyes of this person, but only a guest who was being told I should have the good manners to behave like one.

Remembering the blatant acts of selective racism in the past three decades in our country, our white sisters should be able to see how tenuous our position in this country is. Many of us are now third and fourth generation Americans, but this makes no difference; periodic conflicts involving Third World peoples can abruptly change white American's attitudes towards us. This was clearly demonstrated in 1941 to the Japanese Americans who were in hot pursuit of the great American Dream, who went around saying, "Of course I don't eat Japanese food, I'm an American." We found our status as true-blooded Americans was only an illusion in 1942 when we were singled out to be imprisoned for the duration of the war by our own government. The recent outcry against the Iranians because of the holding of American hostages tells me that the situation has not changed since 1941. When I hear my students say "We're not against the Iranians here who are minding their own business. We're just against those ungrateful ones who overstep our hospitality by demonstrating and badmouthing our government," I know they speak about me.

Asian Pacific American women will not speak out to say what we have on our minds until we feel secure within ourselves that this is our home too; and until our white sisters indicate by their actions that they want to join us in our struggle because it is theirs also. This means a commitment to a truly communal education where we learn from each other because we want to learn from each other, the kind of commitment we do not seem to have at the present time. I am still hopeful that the women of color in our country will be the link to Third World women throughout the world, and that we can help each other broaden our visions.

## Millicent Fredericks

### Gabrielle Daniels

*Millicent Fredericks* is part of my anthology of forgotten Third World women celebrated in poetry, *A Woman Left Behind*. She was Anais Nin's housemaid, and the quotes about her and on black people in general are the original ones from Anais' Diary.

Millicent has been on my mind since I first read the Diaries while getting my B.A. (I am going for my Master's now). One day it just poured out. I haven't been able to find a publisher for her, because some people will not touch it. Too much for them to take, I guess. Too damn bad. All our saints have a few taints of sin . . .

Millicent Fredericks was a black woman from Antigua, who married an American black man and had four children. He had a trade as a tailor that he refused to implement after a while. Millicent was an alien, therefore she could not teach school as she had in Antigua. The only way out was housework. As far as I know she remained the sole support of her family. As noted in the Diaries of Anais Nin, one son was shot up in a gang war.

Here were two women, one black and one white, both educated and silenced in their own ways, yet could not help each other because of race and class differences.

Anais could not get beyond the fact of Millicent's blackness and poverty and suffering. The stench of the *padrona* just reeks about her.

"I would like to write the life of Millicent. But saints' lives are difficult to do . . . A Negro is a concept . . . Millicent perhaps . . . becomes a symbol of what they have to endure . . . the very first day she came to me sent by my mother and she sat sewing, the thread rolled to the floor and I picked it up for her . . . This gesture established the quality of our relationship . . . I would like to devote my life to the recognition of the Negro's equality, but I always feel ineffectual in political battles . . . one can only win by force or trickery . . . she has fine features, which a Gauguin would have enjoyed painting . . ." —from the Diary of Anais Nin.

Only for the sake of art  
Millicent, do you rise  
tall from the ink  
in the pupils you sought  
dark and wide  
taking you in like the letters  
you would have performed  
scratched indelibly on slated memories, chalk dust  
gold on your fingers A teacher.

From A to B  
from Antigua to Harlem  
is no giant step. Brown syrup  
from the cane stills of home  
stick like skin  
adheres to the sharpened ribs of shanty girls  
running careless like your husband from responsibility  
catches white heat rubbing shoulders  
on the New York trolley, the floors and windows  
sucking the strength from your maid's fingers  
your teats dribbling the same tar sweetness on  
to your smacking children the same curse.

Beyond introductions  
the thread of your lives intersected,  
ran from the tangled nest in the sewing basket.  
The spools dared equality. Two aliens  
two mothers well met, living on little thanks.  
The pin money feebly spread out  
for Dad and his drink, Patchen  
a pair of shoes for the youngest, the press  
Pressure. Glimpses in the lilt of clipped English  
from both sides of the ocean:  
Harlem clubs, black street gangs cutting up  
a son, the broken families and the literati  
dining on themselves  
The mending to be done, the mending of words  
the hunger knit in the growling guts of the mind  
Publish, publish our cries.

You the ministrant  
above the small white fact  
which was but one seam

pinched in emergency in the creeping taxi  
is your last conscious scene.

No curtain calls in the proceeding pages  
in the wake of her saving move to California,  
you continue  
to rummage through days-old bread,  
trickle down shops. The killing routine  
she admired of you, and because of you  
escaped to write, to cable Henry  
ever the last sum. "The writer", she said,  
"must be served and taken care of",  
lessening the time  
you could afford for breath  
to clean your own home for Sunday meetin'

Perhaps to dust off your teacher's diploma  
with more care.

No islander, despite her praise  
Gauguin could not have traced  
the furrows in your face,  
the buried seeds waiting in vain  
for spotlight to flower  
a smile, Madonna, smile please...

In your uniform  
you were like everyone of them  
at war to survive  
and then like no other. I have learned  
from such self-denial,  
martyrs and saints are made  
or forgotten.

# “ – But I Know You, American Woman”

## *Judit Moschkovich*

I am Latina, Jewish and an immigrant (all at once). When I tell people who I am, I usually see a puzzled look on their face. I am likely to tell them, “I realize that you are a little confused by me – how I can be both Jewish and Latin American at the same time – but just take my word for it. It is possible!”

The following letter was originally written in response to a letter which appeared in a women’s newspaper with national distribution. This letter reflected the blatant ignorance most Anglo-American women have of Latin cultures. My response is directed to all women of the dominant American culture.\* The Anglo woman’s letter represents spoken and unspoken views and feelings that I have repeatedly encountered in many Anglo-American women.

My immediate reaction to reading the letter was: don’t speak about someone/something unless you can admit your ignorance on the subject. Or, “you don’t know me, but I know you, American women”. I believe that lack of knowledge about other cultures is one of the bases for cultural oppression. I do not hold any individual American woman responsible for the roots of this ignorance about other cultures; it is encouraged and supported by the American educational and political system, and by the American media. I do hold every woman responsible for the *transformation* of this ignorance.

In her letter, the Anglo woman seems to ask for information about Latin culture.\*\* She wants to know what we want as Latin people, what we are struggling for, etc. First of all, it is hard for me to respond to even a simple request for more information about Latin cultures without experiencing strong and conflicting feelings. We’ve all heard it before: *it is not the duty of the oppressed to educate the oppressor*. And yet, I often do feel pressured to become an instructor, not merely a “resource person”. I don’t usually hear “Hey, what do you think of the work of such and such Latin American feminist author”, but rather,

\*When I say “American culture” I obviously do not include Afro-American, Native American, Asian American, Chicana, etc. I am speaking of the *Anglo* culture which dominates American society.

\*\*When I say “Latin culture” I mean Latin American cultures, which have a history of oppression different from the European Latin cultures (French, Italian, etc.)

"Teach me everything you know". Latin American women write books, music etc. A great deal of information about Latin American is readily available in most libraries and bookstores. I say: *read and listen*. We may, then, have something to share.

Second, it is very hard to respond to a request for information when it follows paragraph after paragraph that belittles and insults Latin culture. Anyone that was raised and educated in this country has a very good chance of being ignorant about other cultures, whether they be minority cultures in this country or those of other countries. It's a sort of cultural isolationism, a way of life enforced on the people in this country so as to let them have a free conscience with respect to how they deal with the rest of the world or with subcultures in America. Notice the lack of emphasis on learning other languages, and the lack of knowledge even about where other countries are located. Often, I am asked questions like, "Is Argentina in Europe or Africa?" or "Don't you speak Portuguese down there?" How can one feel guilt about screwing over someone/some country she knows nothing about?

Think of it in terms of men's and women's cultures: women live in male systems, know male rules, speak male language when around men, etc. But what do men really know about women? Only screwed up myths concocted to perpetuate the power imbalance. It is the same situation when it comes to dominant and non-dominant or colonizing and colonized cultures/countries/people. As a bilingual/bicultural woman whose native culture is not American, I live in an American system, abide by American rules of conduct, speak English when around English speakers, etc., only to be confronted with utter ignorance or concocted myths and stereotypes about my own culture.

My Latin culture means many things to me: the food I like to eat, the music I love, the books I read, the language I speak, the land and trees I remember in another country, the jokes I tell, how I am used to kissing and hugging people when I greet them, etc., etc., etc... I could go on forever. It also means the things I'd like to change in Latin culture and I'm not speaking of changing men, but of changing *systems* of oppression. As a result of these changes I do not foresee a culture-less vacuum because "all cultures are bad so I don't want any of them." That culture-less vacuum proposed would actually be the American culture of French Fries and Hamburgers (or soyburgers), American music on the radio (even if it's American women's music on a feminist radio show), not kissing and hugging every time you greet someone, etc. And it would ultimately still be the culture of exploitation of other countries/cultures combined with ignorance about them.

I want to illustrate more specifically some of the un-informed statements made in the Anglo woman's letter. The fascist government of Spain which she refers to (and suggests as Latin people's sole nation of heritage) was made possible by ample economic and political support from the U.S., as are multiple other fascist governments in the world right now, particularly in the Third World. When people are not democratically represented by their government, there is a real difference between the policies of that government and the country's people/culture. If one knows about the bitter struggle of the Spanish people against fascism during the Spanish Civil War, and during Franco's regime, one would never equate Spanish with fascist. I do not equate "American" with imperialist/racist, but I *do* equate American people who do *not* transform their ignorance about "non-dominant" cultures and their relationship to these cultures, with imperialism and racism.

As to the "historical" accident that both North and South America are not dominated by Latin (i.e. non-Anglo) culture, I don't call the appropriation of Mexican land an accident, but an imperialist/expansionist move by the United States. Latin America is a mixture of Native, Black, Spanish and sometimes other European cultures, but it *dominated* by American *mass* culture as Latin American economic systems are dominated by American interests (this applies to most Latin American countries, not all). In Latin America, in addition to our own cultural expressions, we watch American T.V. shows, listen to American music on the radio, wear American jeans (if we can afford them); in other words, we do anything that is economically profitable to America. In comparison, how often do you hear songs in Spanish on the radio in the U.S. or see a Spanish show on T.V.? I'm not talking about radio or T.V. shows by and for the Latin community; I'm talking about *mainstream American* media.

No one will deny that the Spanish conquistadores did in fact conquer the native people of Latin America, and that the latter are still being oppressed there. It is important, however, to know that the Latin American people residing in the U.S. are not some vague "Spanish" conqueror race, but are a multi-racial/cultural people of Native, Black and European background. Latin American culture is quite different from Anglo culture in that each country has retained and integrated the indigenous cultures in food, music, literature, etc. For example the folk music of Argentina is largely Native Indian folk music, played on traditional and European instruments, speaking about traditional themes, using lyrics in Spanish and/or indigenous languages. In the U.S. you don't often think of Native American music as "American folk music."

I'm sick and tired of continually hearing about the destructive aspects of Latin American culture, especially from women who don't know the culture and can only repeat well-known and worn-out myths. Let Latina women tell you what's going on, the good and the bad. I've lived there and I damn well know what it's like. Listen to what I have to say about my culture, rather than believe hearsay, myths or racist stereotypes. No one ever talks about "terminally depressed Scandinavians," or the cut-throat competition instilled by American culture, or the lack of warmth and physical contact in Anglo culture. These are all destructive aspects of Anglo culture, and they cannot be ignored.

The unspoken question always seems to be: "Aren't Latin (or Black, etc.) men *more* macho and women *more* oppressed in that culture?" My answers to that are: 1) It is absurd to compare sexist oppression. Oppression is oppression in whatever form or intensity. 2) Sexist and heterosexist oppression is more or less visible depending on how communicative people in a culture are. That Anglo culture is more Puritan and less visibly expressive does not mean it is less sexist. 3) Most of Latin America is a land economically colonized by the U.S., and as such can't be compared with a colonizing culture (the U.S.). Women's condition in Latin America would be much better were they not living in colonized countries. 4) Most importantly, are we as feminists concerned with men or with women? There is always a women's culture within every culture. Why is everyone so willing to accept the very male view of Latin American culture as consisting simply of macho males and Catholic priests? There are scores of strong women living in Latin America today and our history is full of famous and lesser known strong women. Are they to be ignored as women have always been ignored?

Culture is not really something I have a choice in keeping or discarding. It is in me and of me. Without it I would be an empty shell and so would anyone else. There was a psychology experiment carried out once in which someone was hypnotized and first told they had no future; the subject became happy and careless as a child. When they were told they had no past they became catatonic.

Anglo people should realize when you say we should discard all cultures and start anew that you are speaking English with all its emotional and conceptual advantages.\* You're not really

\*Let me illustrate some differences in language. English expository writing goes in a straight line (sound familiar?) from introductory paragraph, to thesis sentence, to conclusion. Spanish composition follows a form more like a zig-zag, sometimes deviating from straight, linear thinking. I am fighting against this when I write in English so I can be understood by English readers.

about to change your taste in food, your basic style of relating to people, nor the way you talk.

I've heard many people say "Immigrants to this country should learn English, act American, and stop trying to keep their own culture. That's what I would do if I went to another country!" I say Bullshit! Being an immigrant or a bicultural/bilingual person is something which can sometimes be understood only when experienced.\* Would an American woman move to another country and not hold dear her memories of childhood places and people? Would she not remember with longing some special song or food that she has no access to in her new country? And would she not feel her communication limited, no matter how well she learned her second language, because some very deep, emotional things can only be expressed in one's native tongue? Or would she speak to her parents in her newly adopted language? From my personal experience I can say the American woman would experience all these things. It is very hard to deny who you are, where you come from, and how you feel and express yourself (in the deepest possible sense) without ending up hating yourself.

In conclusion I hope this letter expresses my frustration. When Anglo-American women speak of developing a new feminist or women's culture, they are still working and thinking within an Anglo-American cultural framework. This new culture would still be just as racist and ethnocentric as patriarchal American culture. I have often confronted the attitude that anything that is "different" is male. Therefore if I hold on to my Latin culture I am holding on to hateful patriarchal constructs. Meanwhile, the Anglo woman who deals with the world in her Anglo way, with her Anglo culture, is being "perfectly feminist."

I would like us some day to get past the point of having to explain and defend our different cultures (as I am doing in this letter). For that to happen the process of learning about other cultures must be a sharing experience. An experience where American women learn on their own without wanting to be spoon-fed by Latinas, but don't become experts after one book, one conversation, or one stereotype. It is a delicate balance which can only be achieved with caring and respect for each other.

\*As a Latina and an immigrant, I cannot ignore the fact that many Hispanics have been in this country for more generations than Anglos. The Hispanic cultures in the West and Southwest were established long before their land was colonized by Anglos. The Hispanic people have as much right to their cultural heritage as any Anglo (if not more so, since they were here first).

Everything I have written about here has been from my personal experience as an immigrant to this country as a teenager. I'm by no means an expert, but these are issues I constantly deal with in myself and with others. I do not speak for all Latinas, or for all non-Anglo-American women. I would like to acknowledge the support and feedback I received from my friends throughout the writing of the original letter. They were all Anglo-American women (at the time there were no Latinas around me); and they cared enough to get beyond their guilt and/or ignorance.

# The Pathology of Racism: A Conversation with Third World Wimmin

*doris davenport*

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A few years ago in New Haven, I tried to relate to feminism through a local woman's center (located in a Yale basement). I was politely informed that I should "organize" with Black wimmin. In other words, get out. I wanted to start several projects that would include more third world wimmin, but I was told to talk to black wimmin about that. In short, white only. Then, the socialist study group I was interested in was suddenly closed just at the time I wanted to join. And once, in a wimmin's group when a discussion of men came up, it was revealed that half the white wimmin there feared black men, which included me (from the way they glared at me). In other words: *nigger, go home.*

Last year in Los Angeles, after volunteering to work for a local white feminist magazine, repeatedly offering my services and having my ideas and poems rejected, I was finally called to be one of the few token black wimmin at a reception for Ntozake Shange. And the beat, like the song says, goes on. From coast to coast, the feminist movement is racist, but that news is old and stale by now. It is increasingly apparent that the problem is white wimmin.

We, third world wimmin, always discuss this fact. (Frankly, I'm a little tired of it). However, we usually discuss the varied, yet similar manifestations of racism, without going into *why* white wimmin are racist.

In this article, which I conceive of as a conversation with third world wimmin, I want to explore the whys. I don't see the point of further cataloguing my personal grievances against white racist feminists. You know. Whatever you have experienced, I have too. Extrapolate a little. I think that one of our limitations in dealing with this issue is that we stay on the surface. We challenge symptoms of the disease while neglecting the causes. I intend to examine the causes.

If I were a white feminist and somebody called me a racist, I'd probably feel insulted (especially if I knew it was at least partially true). It's like saying someone has a slimy and incurable disease. Naturally I would be reactionary and rake out my health department/liberal credentials, to prove I was clean. But the fact is, the word "racism" is too simplistic, too general, and too easy. You can use the word and not say that much, unless the term is explained or clarified. Once that hap-

pens, racism looks more like a psychological problem (or pathological aberration) than an issue of skin color.

By way of brief clarification, we experience white feminists and their organizations as elitist, crudely insensitive, and condescending. Most of the feminist groups in this country are examples of this elitism. (This anthology came to be as a result of that.) It is also apparent that white feminists still perceive us as the "Other," based on a menial or sexual image: as more sensual, but less cerebral; more interesting, perhaps, but less intellectual; and more oppressed, but less political than they are. (If you need specific examples of this, think about your own experiences with them.)

When we attend a meeting or gathering of theirs, we are seen in only one of two limited or oppressive ways: as being white-washed and therefore sharing all their values, priorities, and goals, etc.; or, if we (even accidentally) mention something particular to the experience of black wimmin, we are seen as threatening, hostile, and subversive to their interests. So when I say racist, these are some of the things I mean. I know this, and so do many white feminists. Because of their one-dimensional and bigoted ideas, we are not respected as feminists or wimmin. Their perverse perceptions of black wimmin mean that they continue to see us as "inferior" to them, and therefore, treat us accordingly. Instead of alleviating the problems of black wimmin, they add to them.

Although black and white feminists can sometimes work together for a common goal with warmth and support, and even love and respect each other occasionally, underneath there is still another message. That is that white feminists, like white boys and black boys, are threatened by us. Moreover, white feminists have a serious problem with truth and "accountability" about how/why they perceive black wimmin as they do.

For example, in a long, and long-winded article, "Disloyal to Civilization, Feminism, Racism, and Gynephobia" Adrienne Rich attempted to address an issue similar to this one. Instead she did what she accused other feminists of doing, she "intellectualized the issue." She evaded it, after apologetically (or proudly, it's hard to tell) saying that "the most unconditional, tender . . . intelligent love I received was given me by a black woman." (Translated, she had a black mammy as a child.) Then, she hid behind a quasi-historical approach that defused the subject. After about fifteen pages, she got close, but apparently also got scared, and backed off. It seems she found it hard, after all, to tell the truth and be "accountable."

\* Adrienne Rich, *On Lies, Secrets and Silence* (New York: Norton, 1979) p. 9.

On the other hand, and as a brief but necessary digression, black wimmin don't always tell the whole truth about and to white wimmin. We know, for example, that we have at least three distinct areas of aversion to white wimmin which affect how we perceive and deal with them: aesthetic, cultural, and social/political. Aesthetically (& physically) we frequently find white wimmin repulsive. That is, their skin colors are unaesthetic (ugly, to some people). Their hair, stringy and straight, is unattractive. Their bodies: rather like misshapen lumps of whitish clay or dough, that somebody forgot to mold in-certain-areas. Furthermore, they have a strange body odor.

Culturally, we see them as limited and bigoted. They can't dance. Their music is essentially undanceable too, and un-pleasant. Plus, they are totally saturated in western or white american culture with little knowledge or respect for the cultures of third world people. (That is, unless they intend to exploit it.) The bland food of white folks is legendary. What they call partying is too low keyed to even be a wake. (A wake is when you sit up all night around the casket of a dead person.) And it goes on and on.

Socially, white people seem rather juvenile and tasteless. Politically they are, especially the feminists, naive and myopic. Then too, it has always been hard for us (black folk) to believe that whites will transcend color to make political alliances with us, for any reason. (The women's movement illustrates this point.)

We have these aversions for one thing, because we saw through the "myth" of the white woman. The myth was that white wimmin were the most envied, most desired (and beautiful), most powerful (controlling white boys) wimmin in existence. The truth is that black people saw white wimmin as some of the least enviable, ugliest, most despised and least respected people, period. From our "close encounters" (i.e., slavery, "domestic" workers, etc.) with them, white people increasingly did seem like beasts or subnormal people. In short, I grew up with a certain kind of knowledge that all black folk, especially wimmin, had access to.

This knowledge led to a mixture of contempt and repulsion. I honestly think that most black feminists have some of these feelings. Yet, we constantly keep them hidden (at least from white wimmin), try to transcend them, and work towards a common goal. A few of us even see beyond the so-called privilege of being white, and perceive white wimmin as very oppressed, and ironically, invisible. This perception has sometimes been enough for us to relate to white feminists as sisters.

If *some* of us can do this, it would seem that some white feminists could too. Instead, they cling to their myth of being privileged, power-

ful, and less oppressed (or equally oppressed, whichever it is fashionable or convenient to be at the time) than black wimmin. Why? Because that is all they have. That is, they have defined, or re-defined themselves and they don't intend to let anything or anybody interfere. Somewhere deep down (denied and almost killed) in the psyche of racist white feminists there is some perception of their real position: powerless, spineless, and invisible. Rather than examine it, they run from it. Rather than seek solidarity with wimmin of color, they pull rank within themselves. Rather than attempt to understand our cultural and spiritual differences, they insist on their own limited and narrow views. In other words, they act out as both "white supremacists" and as a reactionary oppressed group.

As white supremacists, they still try to maintain the belief that white is right, and "godly" (sic). No matter how desperately they try to overcome it, sooner or later it comes out. They really have a hard time admitting that white skin does not insure a monopoly on the best in life, period.

Such a "superiority complex" is obviously a result of compensation. I mean, if whites really knew themselves to be superior, racism could not exist. They couldn't be threatened, concerned, or bothered. I am saying that the "white supremacist" syndrome, especially in white feminists, is the result of a real inferiority complex, or lack of self-identity. Just as a macho male uses wimmin to define himself or to be sure he exists, white feminists use wimmin of color to prove their (dubious) existence in the world.

Anyone familiar with the literature and psychology of an oppressed or *colonized* group knows that as they initially attempt to redefine themselves, they react. Their immediate mental, spiritual, and physical environment is chaotic and confused. The fact is, white wimmin are oppressed; they have been "colonized" by white boys, just as third world people have. Even when white wimmin "belonged" to white boys they had no reality. They belonged as objects, and were treated as such. (As someone else has noted, the original model for colonization was the treatment of white wimmin.) Nobody has yet sufficiently researched or documented the collective psychology of oppressed white wimmin. So consider this as a thesis: they know. And so do I. The reality of their situation is the real pits. Lately, having worked free of the nominal and/or personal control of white boys, white wimmin are desperately reactionary. As a result, they identify with and encourage certain short-sighted goals and beliefs. Their infatuation with the word "power" in the abstract is an example of this: power to them mainly means external established power or control. They have minimal, if any, knowledge of personal power. But most importantly,

as a reactionary oppressed group, they exhibit a strange kind of political bonding or elitism, where white wimmin are the only safe or valid people to be with; all others are threatening. Clearly, this state of mind is a political dead-end, and the reasons for it stem from their great confusion.

So this is my contribution to the conversation. The cause of racism in white feminists is their bizarre oppression (and suppression). This, I contend, is what lies beneath the surface. This pathological condition is what *they* have to admit and deal with, and what we should start to consider and act on. Too often we discuss their economic freedom while ignoring other aspects of life. We sometimes dwell at length on their color, forgetting that they are still wimmin in a misogynist culture. They have been seriously mutated as a result.

In other words, their elitism and narrowminded rigidity are defense mechanisms and that, in part, is why they create "alternatives" for themselves and put up psychological signs saying **white women only**. Part of the reason is fear, as a result of centuries of living with dogs and having no identities. Now, they are threatened by anyone different from them in race, politics, mannerisms, or clothing. It's partly a means of self-protection but that does not excuse it. Feminism either addresses itself to all wimmin, or it becomes even more so just another elitist, prurient white organization, defeating its own purposes.

As a partial solution to some of the above, and to begin to end some of the colossal ignorance that white feminists have about us, we (black and white feminists) could engage in "c.r." conversations about and with each other. If done with a sense of honesty, and a sense of *humor*, we might accomplish something. If overcoming our differences were made a priority, instead of the back-burner issue that it usually is, we might resolve some of our problems.

On the other hand, my experiences with white feminists prevent me from seeing dialogue as anything but a naive beginning. I honestly see our trying to "break into" the white feminist movement as almost equivalent to the old, outdated philosophy of integration and assimilation. It is time we stopped this approach. We know we have no desire to be white. On the other hand, we know we have some valid concerns and goals that white feminists overlook. By now, in fact, a few of their organizations are as rigid and stagnant as any other "established" institution, with racism included in the by-laws.

So, sisters, we might as well give up on them, except in rare and individual cases where the person or group is deliberately and obviously more evolved mentally and spiritually. That is, un-racist. We should stop wasting our time and energy, until these wimmin evolve. Meanwhile, we can re-channel our energies toward ourselves.

We can start to develop a feminist movement based on the realities and priorities of third world wimmin. Racism would have to be a priority. Misogyny is another major problem of third world wimmin. Not only that, many of our communities are more homophobic (or " lesbophobic") than white ones. Also, a lot of our sisters are straight, and have no intention of changing. We cannot afford to ignore them and their needs, nor the needs of many third world wimmin who are both feminists and nationalists; that is, concerned with our sex, and also our race. Finally, a lot of third world wimmin are ignorant about each other. We have yet to make our own realities known to ourselves, or anyone else. So we really do have a lot more to concentrate on beside the pathology of white wimmin. What we need to do is deal with us, first, then maybe we can develop a wimmin's movement that is more international in scope and universal in application.

It is time we stopped letting the rest of this oppressive society dictate our behavior, devour our energies, and control us, body and soul. It is time we dealt with our own energies, and our own revolutionary potential, like the constructive and powerful forces that they are. When we *do* act on our power and potential, there will be a *real* feminist movement in this country, one that will finally include all wimmin.

# We're All in the Same Boat

## Rosario Morales

November 1979

*I am not white. I am not middle class.*

I am white skinned and puertorican. I was born into the working class and married into the middle class. I object to the label white & middle class both because they don't include my working class life and my puertoricanness, but also because "white & middle class" stands for a kind of politics. *Color and class don't define people or politics.* I get angry with those in the women's movement and out of it who deal with class & color as if they defined politics and people.

My experience in the Puerto Rican communist & independence movements has made me suspicious of and angry at Puerto Rican (& other Latin American) activist women. They have been sexist and supported the macho line that we *needed to fight against imperialism first – only later could we think about women as women.* I desperately want Latina women in the feminist movement while I fear the entry of hispanic & often black women because I fear they will play an anti-feminist role.

Racism is an ideology. Everyone is capable of being racist whatever their color and condition. Only some of us are liable to racist attack. Understanding the racist ideology – where and how it penetrates – is what is important for the feminist movement, not "including" women of color or talking about "including" men. *Guilt* is a fact for us all, white & colored: an identification with the oppressor and oppressive ideology. Let us, instead, identify, understand, and feel with the oppressed as a way out of the morass of racism and guilt.

I want to be whole. I want to claim my self to be puertorican, and U.S. american, working class & middle class, housewife and intellectual, feminist, marxist, and anti-imperialist. I want to claim my racism, especially that directed at myself, so I can struggle with it, so I can use my energy to be a woman, creative and revolutionary.

April, 1980

This society this incredible way of living divides us by class by color It says we are individual and alone and don't you forget it It says the only way out of our doom of our sex our class our race is some individual gift and character and hard work and then all

we get all we ever get is to change class or color or sex to rise to bleach to masculinize an enormous game of musical chairs and that's only at its fairy tale Horatio Alger best that's only at its best

From all directions we get all the beliefs to go with these divisions we believe all kinds of things about: what real men really are what women must want what black people feel and smell like what white people do and deserve how rich people earn their comforts and cadillacs how poor people get what's coming to them

O we are all racist we are all sexist some of us only some of us are the targets of racism of sexism of homophobia of class denigration but we all all breathe in racism with the dust in the streets with the words we read and we struggle those of us who struggle we struggle endlessly endlessly to think and be and act differently from all that

Listen you and listen hard I carry within me a vicious anti-semitic voice that says jew him down that says dirty jew that says things that stop me dead in the street and make the blood leave my face I have fought that voice for 45 years all the years that I lived with and among jews who are almost me whose rhythms of speech and ways of laughing are close beside me are dear to me whose sorrows reach deep inside me that voice that has tried to tell me that that love and identification are unreal fake cannot be and I refuse it I refuse its message

I carry a shell a white and crisp voiced shell to hide my brown golden soft spanish voiced inner self to pass to hide my puerto-ricanness

I carry a pole 18 inches long to hold me at the correct distance from black-skinned people

I carry hard metal armor with spikes with shooting weapons in every joint with fire breathing from every hole to protect me to prepare me to assault any man from 13 to 89

I am a whole circus by myself a whole dance company with stance and posture for being in middle class homes in upper class buildings for talking to men for speaking with blacks for carefully angling and directing for choreographing my way thru the maze of classes of people and places thru the little boxes of sex race class nationality sexual orientation intellectual standing political preference the automatic contortions the exhausting camouflage with which I go thru this social space called

### CAPITALIST PATRIARCHY

a daunting but oh so nicely covering name this is no way to live Listen listen with care class and color and sex do not define

people do not define politics a class society defines people by class a racist society defines people by color We feminists socialists radicals define people by their struggles against the racism sexism classism that they harbor that surrounds them

So stop saying that she acts that way because she's middle class that that's all you can expect from that group because its white that they're just men, quit it!

We know different things some very much more unpleasant things if we've been women poor black or lesbian or all of those we know different things depending on what sex what color what lives we live where we grew up What schooling what beatings with or without shoes steak or beans but what politics each of us is going to be and do is anybody's guess

Being female doesn't stop us from being sexist we've had to choose early or late at 7 14 27 56 to think different dress different act different to struggle to organize to picket to argue to change other women's minds to change our own minds to change our feelings ours yours and mine constantly to change and change and change to fight the onslaught on our minds and bodies and feelings

I'm saying that the basis of our unity is that in the most important way we are all in the same boat all subjected to the violent pernicious ideas we have learned to hate that we must all struggle against them and exchange ways and means hints and how tos that only some of us are victims of sexism only some of us are victims of racism of the directed arrows of oppression but all of us are sexist racist all of us.

# An Open Letter to Mary Daly

## *Audre Lorde*

Dear Mary,

Thank you for having *Gyn/Ecology* sent to me. So much of it is full of import, useful, generative, and provoking. As in *Beyond God The Father*, many of your analyses are strengthening and helpful to me. Therefore, it is because of what you have given to me in the past work that I write this letter to you now, hoping to share with you the benefits of my insights as you have shared the benefits of yours with me.

This letter has been delayed because of my grave reluctance to reach out to you, for what I want us to chew upon here is neither easy nor simple. The history of white women who are unable to hear black women's words, or to maintain dialogue with us, is long and discouraging. But for me to assume that you will not hear me represents not only history, but an old pattern of relating, sometimes protective and sometimes dysfunctional, which we, as women shaping our future, are in the process of shattering. I hope.

I believe in your good faith toward all women, in your vision of a future within which we can all flourish, and in your commitment to the hard and often painful work necessary to effect change. In this spirit I invite you to a joint clarification of some of the differences which lie between us as a black and a white woman.

When I started reading *Gyn/Ecology*, I was truly excited by the vision behind your words, and nodded my head as you spoke in your first passage of myth and mystification. Your words on the nature and function of the Goddess, as well as the ways in which her face has been obscured, agreed with what I myself have discovered in my searches through African myth/legend/religion for the true nature of old female power.

So I wondered, why doesn't Mary deal with Afrekete as an example? Why are her goddess-images only white, western-european, judeo-christian? Where was Afrekete, Yemanje, Oyo and Mawulisa? Where are the warrior-goddesses of the Vodun, the Dohomeian Amazons and the warrior-women of Dan? Well, I thought, Mary has made a conscious decision to narrow her scope and to deal only with the ecology of western-european women.

Then I came to the first three chapters of your second passage, and it was obvious that you were dealing with non-european women, but only as victims and preyed-upon each other. I began to feel my

history and my mythic background distorted by the absence of any images of my foremothers in power. Your inclusion of african genital mutilation was an important and necessary piece in any consideration of female ecology, and too little has been written about it. But to imply, however, that all women suffer the same oppression simply because we are women, is to lose sight of the many varied tools of patriarchy. It is to ignore how those tools are used by women without awareness against each other.

To dismiss our black foremothers may well be to dismiss where european women learned to love. As an african-american woman in white patriarchy, I am used to having my archetypal experience distorted and trivialized but it is terribly painful to feel it being done by a woman whose knowledge so much matches my own. As women-identified women, we cannot afford to repeat these same old destructive, wasteful errors of recognition.

When I speak of knowledge, as you know, I am speaking of that dark and true depth which understanding serves, waits upon, and makes accessible through language to ourselves and others. It is this depth within each of us that nurtures vision.

What you excluded from *Gyn/Ecology* dismissed my heritage and the heritage of all other non-european women, and denied the real connections that exist between all of us.

It is obvious that you have done a tremendous amount of work for this book. But simply because so little material on non-white female power and symbol exists in white women's words from a radical feminist perspective, to exclude this aspect of connection from even comment in your work is to deny the fountain of non-european female strength and power that nurtures each of our visions. It is to make a point by choice.

Then to realize that the only quotations from black women's words were the ones you used to introduce your chapter on african genital mutilation, made me question why you needed to use them at all. For my part, I felt that you had in fact misused my words, utilized them only to testify against myself as a woman of color. For my words which you used were no more, nor less, illustrative of this chapter, than *Poetry Is Not A Luxury* or any number of my other poems might have been of many other parts of *Gyn/Ecology*.

So the question arises in my mind, Mary, do you ever really read the work of black women? Did you ever read my words, or did you merely finger through them for quotations which you thought might valuably support an already-conceived idea concerning some old and distorted connection between us? This is not a rhetorical question. To me this feels like another instance of the knowledge, crone-logy and work of women of color being ghettoized by a white woman dealing

only out of a patriarchal western-european frame of reference. Even your words on page 49 of *Gyn/Ecology*:

"The strength which Self-centering women find, in finding our Background, is our own strength, which we give back to our Selves." have a different ring as we remember the old traditions of power and strength and nurturance found in the female bonding of african women. It is there to be tapped by all women who do not fear the revelation of connection to themselves.

Have you read my work, and the work of other black women, for what it could give you? Or did you hunt through only to find words that would legitimize your chapter on African genital mutilation in the eyes of other black women? And if so, then why not use our words to legitimize or illustrate the other places where we connect in our being and becoming? If, on the other hand, it was not black women you were attempting to reach, in what way did our words illustrate your point for white women?

Mary, I ask that you be aware of how this serves the destructive forces of racism and separation between women – the assumption that the herstory and myth of white women is the legitimate and sole herstory and myth of all women to call upon for power and background, and that non-white women and our herstories are noteworthy only as decorations, or examples of female victimization. I ask that you be aware of the effect that this dismissal has upon the community of black women, and how it devalues your own words. This dismissal does not essentially differ from the specialized devaluations that make black women prey, for instance, to the murders even now happening in your own city.\* When patriarchy dismisses us, it encourages our murderers. When radical lesbian feminist theory dismisses us, it encourages its own demise.

This dismissal stands as a real block to communication between us. This block makes it far easier to turn away from you completely than to attempt to understand the thinking behind your choices. Should the next step be war between us, or separation? Assimilation within a solely western-european herstory is not acceptable.

Mary, I ask that you re-member what is dark and ancient and divine within your self that aids your speaking. As outsiders, we need each other for support and connection and all the other necessities of living on the borders. But in order to come together we must recognize each other. Yet I feel that since you have so completely un-recognized me, perhaps I have been in error concerning you and no longer recognize you.

\*In the spring of 1979, twelve black women were murdered in the Boston area.

I feel you do celebrate differences between white women as a creative force towards change, rather than a reason for misunderstanding and separation. But you fail to recognize that, as women, those differences expose all women to various forms and degrees of patriarchal oppression, some of which we share, and some of which we do not. For instance, surely you know that for non-white women in this country, there is an 80% fatality rate from breast cancer; three times the number of unnecessary eventurations, hysterectomies and sterilizations as for white women; three times as many chances of being raped, murdered, or assaulted as exist for white women. These are statistical facts, not coincidences nor paranoid fantasies. I had hoped the lesbian consciousness of having been "other" would make it easier to recognize the differences that exist in the history and struggle of black women and white women.

Within the community of women, racism is a reality force within my life as it is not within yours. The white women with hoods on in Ohio handing out KKK literature on the street may not like what you have to say, but they will shoot me on sight. (If you and I were to walk into a classroom of women in Dismal Gulch, Alabama, where the only thing they knew about each of us was that we were both Lesbian/Radical/Feminist, you would see exactly what I mean.)

The oppression of women knows no ethnic nor racial boundaries, true, but that does not mean it is identical within those boundaries. Nor do the reservoirs of our ancient power know these boundaries, either. To deal with one without even alluding to the other is to distort our commonality as well as our difference.

For then beyond sisterhood, is still racism.

We first met at the MLA\* panel, "The Transformation of Silence Into Language and Action." Shortly before that date, I had decided never again to speak to white women about racism. I felt it was wasted energy, because of their destructive guilt and defensiveness, and because whatever I had to say might better be said by white women to one another, at far less emotional cost to the speaker, and probably with a better hearing. This letter attempts to break this silence.

I would like not to have to destroy you in my consciousness. So as a sister Hag, I ask you to speak to my perceptions.

Whether or not you do, I thank you for what I have learned from you. This letter is in repayment.

In the hands of Afrekete,  
Audre Lorde  
May 6, 1979

\*Modern Language Association.

# The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master's House

*Comments at "The Personal and the Political" Panel  
(Second Sex Conference, October 29, 1979)*

**Audre Lorde**

I agreed to take part in a New York University Institute for the Humanities conference a year ago, with the understanding that I would be commenting upon papers dealing with the role of difference within the lives of american women; difference of race, sexuality, class, and age. For the absence of these considerations weakens any feminist discussion of the personal and the political.

It is a particular academic arrogance to assume any discussion of feminist theory in this time and in this place without examining our many differences, and without a significant input from poor women, black and third-world women, and lesbians. And yet, I stand here as a black lesbian feminist, having been invited to comment within the only panel at this conference where the input of black feminists and lesbians is represented. What this says about the vision of this conference is sad, in a country where racism, sexism and homophobia are inseparable. To read this program is to assume that lesbian and black women have nothing to say of existentialism, the erotic, women's culture and silence, developing feminist theory, or heterosexuality and power. And what does it mean in personal and political terms when even the two black women who did present here were literally found at the last hour? What does it mean when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy? It means that only the most narrow perimeters of change are possible and allowable.

The absence of any consideration of lesbian consciousness or the consciousness of third world women leaves a serious gap within this conference and within the papers presented here. For example, in a paper on material relationships between women, I was conscious of an either/or model of nurturing which totally dismissed my knowledge as a black lesbian. In this paper there was no examination of mutuality between women, no systems of shared support, no interdependence as exists between lesbians and women-identified women. Yet it is only in the patriarchal model of nurturance that women "who attempt to emancipate themselves pay perhaps too high a price for the results," as this paper states.

For women, the need and desire to nurture each other is not pathological but redemptive, and it is within that knowledge that our real

power is rediscovered. It is this real connection, which is so feared by a patriarchal world. For it is only under a patriarchal structure that maternity is the only social power open to women.

Interdependency between women is the only way to the freedom which allows the "I" to "be", not in order to be used, but in order to be creative. This is a difference between the passive "be" and the active "being."

Advocating the mere tolerance of difference between women is the grossest reformism. It is a total denial of the creative function of difference in our lives. For difference must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic. Only then does the necessity for interdependency become unthreatening. Only within that interdependency of different strengths, acknowledged and equal, can the power to seek new ways to actively "be" in the world generate, as well as the courage and sustenance to act where there are no charters.

Within the interdependence of mutual (non-dominant) differences lies that security which enables us to descend into the chaos of knowledge and return with true visions of our future, along with the concomitant power to effect those changes which can bring that future into being. Difference is that raw and powerful connection from which our personal power is forged.

As women, we have been taught to either ignore our differences or to view them as causes for separation and suspicion rather than as forces for change. Without community, there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression. But community must not mean a shedding of our differences, nor the pathetic pretense that these differences do not exist.

Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society's definition of acceptable women; those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference; those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are black, who are older, know that *survival is not an academic skill*. It is learning how to stand alone, unpopular and sometimes reviled, and how to make common cause with those other identified as outside the structures, in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. *For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.* They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master's house as their only source of support.

Poor and third world women know there is a difference between the daily manifestations and dehumanizations of marital slavery and prostitution, because it is our daughters who line 42nd Street. The

Black panelists' observation about the effects of relative powerlessness and the differences of relationship between black women and men from white women and men illustrate some of our unique problems as black feminists. If white american feminist theory need not deal with the differences between us, and the resulting difference in aspects of our oppressions, then what do you do with the fact that the women who clean your houses and tend your children while you attend conferences on feminist theory are, for the most part, poor and third world women? What is the theory behind racist feminism?

In a world of possibility for us all, our personal visions help lay the groundwork for political action. The failure of the academic feminists to recognize difference as a crucial strength is a failure to reach beyond the first patriarchal lesson. Divide and conquer, in our world, must become define and empower.

Why weren't other black women and third world women found to participate in this conference? Why were two phone calls to me considered a consultation? Am I the only possible source of names of black feminists? And although the black panelist's paper ends on a important and powerful connection of love between women, what about inter-racial co-operation between feminists who don't love each other?

In academic feminist circles, the answer to these questions is often "We did not know who to ask." But that is the same evasion of responsibility, the same cop-out, that keeps black women's art out of women's exhibitions, black women's work out of most feminist publications except for the occasional "Special Third World Women's Issue,"\* and black women's texts off of your reading lists. But as Adrienne Rich pointed out in a recent talk, white feminists have educated themselves about such an enormous amount over the past ten years, how come you haven't also educated yourselves about black women and the differences between us – white and black – when it is key to our survival as a movement?

Women of today are still being called upon to stretch across the gap of male ignorance, and to educate men as to our existence and our needs. This is an old and primary tool of all oppressors to keep the oppressed occupied with the master's concerns. Now we hear that it is the task of black and third world women to educate white women, in the face of tremendous resistance, as to our existence, our differences, our relative roles in our joint survival. This is a diversion of energies and a tragic repetition of racist patriarchal thought.

\**Conditions of Brooklyn, NY* is a major exception. It has fairly consistently published the work of women of color before it was "fashionable" to do so. (editor's footnote)

Simone DeBeauvoir once said:

*"It is in the knowledge of the genuine conditions of our lives that we must draw our strength to live and our reasons for acting."*

Racism and homophobia are real conditions of all our lives in this place and this time. *I urge each one of us here to reach down into that deep place of knowledge inside herself and touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives there. See whose face it wears.* Then the personal as the political can begin to illuminate all our choices.



## Between the Lines



On Culture, Class, and Homophobia



I do not believe/our wants have made all our lies/holy.

—Audre Lorde\*

What lies between the lines are the things that women of color do not tell each other. There are reasons for our silences: the change in generation between mother and daughter, the language barriers between us, our sexual identity, the educational opportunities we had or missed, the specific cultural history of our race, the physical conditions of our bodies and our labor.

As Audre Lorde states in the closing piece of the preceding section, "Difference is that raw and powerful connection from which our personal power is forged." It is critical now that Third World feminists begin to speak directly to the specific issues that separate us. We cannot afford to throw ourselves haphazardly under the rubric of "Third World Feminism" only to discover later that there are serious differences between us which could collapse our dreams, rather than fuse alliances.

As Third World women, we understand the importance, yet limitations of race ideology to describe our total experience. Cultural differences get subsumed when we speak of "race" as an isolated issue: where does the Black Puerto Rican sister stake out her alliance in this country, with the Black community or the Latin? And color alone cannot define her status in society – How do we compare the struggles of the middle class Black woman with those of the light-skinned Latina welfare mother? Further, how each of us perceives our ability to be radical against this oppressive state is largely affected by our economic privilege and our specific history of colonization in the U.S. Some of us were brought here centuries ago as slaves, others had our land of birthright taken away from us, some of us are the daughters and granddaughters of immigrants, others of us are still newly immigrated to the U.S.

Repeated throughout this section is each woman's desire to have all her sisters of color actively identified and involved as feminists. One of the biggest sources of separation among women of color in terms of feminism has been homophobia. This fear that we (whatever our sexuality) breathe in every day in our communities never fully allows us to

\*\*"Between Ourselves," *The Black Unicorn* (New York: Norton, 1978), p. 112.

feel invulnerable to attack on our own streets, and sometimes even in the homes we grew up in (let alone in the white man's world). So often it is the fear of lesbianism which causes many of us to feel our politics and passion are being ignored or discounted by other Third World people. "There's nothing to be compared with how you feel when you're cut cold by your own . . ." (Barbara Smith). But we refuse to make a choice between our cultural identity and sexual identity, between our race and our femaleness. We are not turning our backs on our people nor on our selves. We even claim lesbianism as an "act of resistance" (Clarke) against the same forces that silence us as people of color.

*We write letters home to Ma.*

Surfacing from these pages again and again is the genuine sense of loss and pain we feel when we are denied our home because of our desire to free ourselves as specifically female persons. So, we turn to each other for strength and sustenance. We write letters to each other incessantly. Across a kitchen table, Third World feminist strategy is plotted. We talk long hours into the night. It is when this midnight oil is burning that we secretly reclaim our goddesses and our female-identified cultural tradition. Here we put Billie Holiday back into the hands and hearts of the women who understand her.

The difference that we have feared to mention because of our urgent need for solidarity with each other begins to be spoken to on these pages, but also the similarities that so often go unrecognized – that a light-skinned Latin woman could feel "at home" and "safe" (Morales) among her Afro-American sisters – that among many of us there is a deep-rooted identification and affinity which we were not, logically, supposed to feel toward each other living in segregated white-america.

We turn to each other to make family and even there, after the exhilaration of our first discovery of each other subsides, we are forced to confront our own lack of resources as Third World women living in the U.S. Without money, without institutions, without one community center to call our own we so often never get as far as dreamed while plotting in our kitchens. We disappoint each other. Sometimes we even die on each other. How to reconcile with the death of a friend, the death of a spirit?

We begin by speaking directly to the deaths and disappointments. Here we begin to fill in the spaces of silence between us. For it is between these seemingly irreconcilable lines – the class lines, the politically correct lines, the daily lines we run down to each other to keep difference and desire at a distance – that the truth of our connection lies.

# The Other Heritage

## Rosario Morales

*(for June Jordan and Teish and all other Black women at the San Francisco Poetry Workshop; January 1980)*

I forgot I forgot the other heritage the other strain refrain  
the silver thread thru my sound the ebony sheen to my life to the  
look of things to the sound of how I grew up which was in Harlem  
right down in Spanish Harlem El Barrio and bounded I always say to  
foreigners from Minnesota Ohio and Illinois bounded on the North  
by Italians and on the South by Black Harlem A library in each of  
these almost forbidden places so no wonder I didn't take off with  
books till I hit the South Bronx What I didn't forget was the look of  
Ithaca Rochester Minneapolis and Salt Lake bleached bled and  
bleached the street full of white ghosts like Chinese visions And  
the first time Dick and I drove back thru New York past Amsterdam  
Avenue right thru the heart of Harlem I breathed again safe  
brown and black walking the streets safe My mami taught me  
my teacher taught me everybody taught me watch out  
black smelly savage keep out of the way I did too so how  
come I come to feel safe! when I hit Harlem when I hit a city  
with enough color when a city gets moved in on when Main  
Street Vermont looks mottled agouti black and brown and  
white when the sounds of the english Black folk speak and the  
sounds of Spanish wiggle thru the clean lit air I still shy and start  
from black men from about thirteen on but then I shy and start from  
all men starting from when they think to be men and so do the things  
men do my mami taught me that and that stuck but then I learnt  
that on my own too I got myself a clean clear sense of danger  
that's what smells not black skin but danger stalking the streets  
for me I can smell it a mile away wafting to me in the breeze I  
keep downwind raise my head to sniff the air I only muse and  
rest my neck when in the herd and in the day and loping thru people  
traffic on the streets surrounded by the sounds of wheeled traffic in  
the streets I think and plan and forget to look but not alone and not  
at nite I lift my head I sniff I smell the danger and wheel and  
run long before he thinks maybe she looks about right a morsel  
for my appetite I bound away and pant safe for this time

safe but all I feel when I sit down with you black woman the only danger in my air is from some whirring voice inside that always says you don't belong and if you don't utter just just right they will know you don't belong and toss you out and I feel that everytime with every group of any color no matter what they speak but what I feel inside nowhere near that grating prating voice is well OK! this sounds just right this here music is music to my ears here I hear something that feels like oh like Carlos Gardel moaning his tangos like the special beat caribbean drums do I forgot this heritage african Black up here in this cold place the sound of african in english of drums in these musics I forgot I breathed you with my air and declared fine and when you're not there I look and ask for where you've gone but I know I know why I forgot I'm not supposed to remember what I do remember is to walk in straight and white into the store and say good morning in my see how white upper class how refined and kind voice all crisp with consonants bristling with syllables protective coloring in racist fields looks white and crisp like cabbage looks tidy like laid out gardens like white aprons on black dresses like please and thank you and you're welcome like neat and clean and see I swept and scrubbed and polished ain't I nice que hay de criticar will I do will I pass will you let me thru will they let me be not see me here beneath my skin behind my voice crouched and quiet and so so still not see not hear me there where I crouch hiding my eyes my indian bones my spanish sounds muttering mielda que gente fria y fea se creen gran cosa ai escupe chica en su carifresca en su carifea meate ahi en el piso feo y frio yo valgo mas que un piso limpio you valgo mas yo valgo cagate en l'alfombra chica arrancale el pelo yo quiero salir de aqui yo quiero salir di ti yo quiero salir you see she's me she's the me says safe sarita safe when I see you many and black around the table behind me in the big room and up in front June Jordan how you belt it out and how I take it in right to where she sits brown and golden and when she and I laughed big last nite I was not "too loud" I was not "too much" I was just right just me just brown and pink and full of drums inside beating rhythm for my feet my tongue my eyes my hands my arms swinging and smacking I was just right just right just right sepanlo ninas m'hijas triguenas bellas sepalos June Jordan mujer feroz aqui me quedo y aqui estoy right!

# billie lives! billie lives

## *hattie gossett*

yeah billie holiday lives.

shes probably got a little house somewhere with yemanya jezabel the queen of sheba and maria stewart. plus sojourner truth ma rainey ida cox lil hardin and sapphire & her mama are there. and what would they do without sister rosetta thorpe big maybelle dinah washington long tall sally & her aunt mary and fannie lou hamer? and please dont forget ruby doris smith robinson tammi terrell sara gomez and sisterwoman cuz they are probably all there too helping with the free community music and life school that billie started. and you know that anaci the original spiderman david walker chaka denmark vesey baby brother lester prez young john coltrane beanhead ray malcolm x and stephen biko probably be round the house all the time too. plus the amistad crew and shango. but its billies house that bessie smith left her when bessie moved to chicago with nzinga the warrior queen ochun harriet tubman sweet georgia brown josina machel and peaches.

of course we know that charlie bird parker lives cuz folks be saying and writing bird lives! all the time. they even got buttons. and this year 1980 has been declared the year of the bird. but when i woke up this morning i woke up thinking billie lives! so after i got through talking on the phone to this sister who called me up right in the middle of when i was thinking billie lives! i got up and put on a tape of an old record by billie and listened to it again for the first time in a long time while i made a pitcher of orange & lemonade and drank some. then i took the tape and went outside to sit in the sun and listen to the tape some more and write this poem down in a hurry.

cuz billie lives and i wanna call her up and make an appointment and go by and visit her one afternoon and take her some violets and orchids and some peaches (and if you dont like my peaches dont shake my tree) one afternoon when shes got a few hours when shes not too busy and shes relaxed and dont mind being bothered with somebody asking her a whole lotta questions about all kinds of stuff but the main thing i wanna ask her about is how did she do it and what did she do when she made this record that i am listening to now on this tape that had those bigtime bigdaddies jumping outta windows and otherwise offing theyselves that time.

oh you never heard of that record.

well to tell you the truth i hadnt either til this other sister told me about it. or rather i had heard of the record and i had even listened to it. but i hadnt heard of the effect that the record had on the bigtime daddies. thats what i hadnt heard about. you know the effect that this record had is somehow strangely not mentioned in the movie or in any of the books articles etc. that are supposed to be telling the billie holiday story. thats why i wanna ask billie about it and listen to her run it down about how it was that she had all them bigdaddies jumping outta windows and otherwise offing themselves behind this record.

now you know this record had to be bad cuz it had to be taken off the radio. thats how bad this record was. as a public service it was taken off the radio cuz everytime the record played on the radio the bigdaddies would be knocking each other outta the way to get to the window and take concrete nosedives. in droves.

plus they dont play it on the radio that much even now. when they do play something by billie once every other blue moon they dont hardly ever play this. and when me and this other sister who first told me about the effect the record had when we wanted to listen to it we couldnt find nobody that we knew that had it. oh they had heard of it. but they didnt have it. so when we wanted to listen to the record we had to git on the a train and ride way downtown then switch over to the path train and ride a while then switch again to the underground streetcar for a few blocks then walk a few more blocks to this special library in newark new jersey just to hear it. cuz we couldnt find it in the nyc public library though later we found out that if we had had some money and had had known what to ask for we could have bought this album called the billie holiday story volume 2 which contains this song i am talking about but we didnt have no money nor did we know what to ask for.

and i cant even repeat what we had to go through to get this tape of the original 78 that i am listening to now. if you get my meaning.

anyway. this record was made august 6 1941 just 4 months to the day before the japanese took everybody by surprise with that early morning bombing raid on pearl harbor in the early summer days of billies career and it was a 78 on the okeh label called gloomy sunday subtitled hungarian suicide song with the teddy wilson orchestra. it was one of those my man is dead so now i am gonna throw myself in the grave too funeral dirge numbers (tragic mulatress division) that they used to mash on billie when she went into the studio.

it wasnt even no bad blues.

it was some of their shit and billie said okay watch this and she took the tune and she turned it around on them.

yeah. i am telling you she had them bigdaddy blip d blips leaping outta windows in droves honey.

in droves do you hear me.

i wonder what it was like when billie sang this song in person. i guess i better ask her that too when i go for my appointment. can you imagine what that was like. cuz you know billie used to sing at the cafe society downtown in greenwhich village at one time which was one of them slick bigdaddies main hangout joints at that time and after billie got off work down in the village she would catch a cab and go uptown to harlem to the afterhours spot and jam and hangout and have a good time talking to people and it could possibly be that if she had sung that song during the last set at one of those cafe society gigs that while she was uptown cuttin up and stuff you know who was downtown plunging downward off the roofs of their penthouses.

and then when she woke up later that day the papers would have big headlines about who had taken the plunge during the early dawn hours. do you think billie had a good laugh to herself when she read those headlines? or are you one of those people who would say billie wasnt aware of what was going on? that she was only a po lil gal from baltimore who was just trying to sing and entertain people or that if she was aware then she was confused and heartbroken that her music was being taken in the wrong way? nigguh pullease! well but if you think like that then you dont belong in this poem so i am gonna cancel you right out. go somewhere and write yo own poem.

well anyway when i go for my appointment i am gonna ask billie about it cuz i wanna hear what she says. plus i wanna see if she will explain how she did it. did the juju women give her some kind of special herbal potions to purify her throat and vocal chords and lungs and what not. did the wise women teach her an ancient way of breathing ennunciating. did she have a certain type of dream the night before the recording session during which the goddesses appeared and gave her a sign and said go ahead on in that studio tomorrow sister and turn that shit around on them bigtime blank t blanks so we can get them off our backs and move forward to a brighter day.

i wanna ask billie about it. and i wanna see if she would teach some of us how to do it too. do you think she would? when i go see her i am gonna ask her if she could give some of us weekly lessons cuz i know some other sisters that want to learn how to use their voices the same way billie did on this record.

cuz the record was taken off the radio the last time but things are different now. we are more sophisticated now and we have learned some more sophisticated methods. like subliminal seduction. you know those tapes with that weird nonmusic and those hidden voices playing

in the supermarkets and other stores that numb our minds and then plant suggestions in our minds that trick us into spending all our money on a buncha stuff that we dont need? and those tapes they play in restaurants and elevators and on the phone when they put you on hold? yeah that's subliminal seduction. people could ride bicycles or delivery trucks with hidden high frequency killer diller tape cassettes through certain neighborhoods at certain hours.

cuz the record was taken off the radio the last time but we have developed some other methods.

yeah billie lives.

shes probably got that house that bessie smith left her when bessie moved to chicago with nzinga the warrior queen ochun harriet tubman sweet georgia brown josina machel and peaches.

i wanna go see her and ask her if she will teach some of us how to use our voices like she used hers on that old 78 record i am listening to now on this tape so we can learn how to have these moderntime bigtime so & sos jumping outta windows and otherwise offing theyselves in droves so we can raise up offa our knees and move on to a brighter day.

saturday august 23 1980.

# Across the Kitchen Table

## A Sister-to-Sister Dialogue

### *Barbara Smith and Beverly Smith*

In June 1980, we sent Beverly and Barbara a number of questions regarding their experiences as Black feminists in the Women's Movement. The following is a transcript of their responses.

The Editors

#### **Feminism: More than a "Click" and a Clique.**

The Editors: *What do you see as the effects of the pervasiveness of white middle class women in the feminist movement? In your experience how do class and race issues intersect in the movement?*

Beverly: . . . on Saturday night, what happened is that she was flossing her teeth after the meal. I was just so impressed with the fact that she would take such good care of her teeth. And so she said that the reason was that when she was a child her mother had saved up money for her to go and visit her grandmother or something down South. And she had been looking forward to it all year. I think that she usually went. But what happened is that this particular year she went to the dentist right before, and she had 7 cavities. And that wiped out her vacation. Because it was a matter of either/or. But of course, that's not the poorest you can get either. "My God" I said "I bet there's hardly a white woman that we come into contact with that would have any perception of what that meant." And yet it sounded so familiar to me.

Barbara: Exactly. What we want to describe in this dialogue are the class differences we experience on this kind of basic level which "high-level" analysis and rhetoric don't get to.

An example I can think of and which drives me crazy is the arrogance some white women display about "choosing" not to finish school, you know, "downward mobility". But the thing is they don't have to worry about being asked "Do you have a degree," and then being completely cut out of a whole range of jobs and opportunity if they don't. Race is a concept of having to be twice as qualified, twice as good to go half as far. And I feel like at this point, in these economic times, it's like being three times as good to go half as far. No way in Hell would I give up getting a degree or some piece of paper that would give me more economic leverage in this "boys" system. That's not necessarily a perception that white women have. In fact, I know a lot of

white women who never finished college, yet are functioning in ways that if they had been Black women would be completely unavailable to them.

This ties in with another thing we had talked about in the past, which is the difference between women's politics, who come to a realization that oppression exists say at age 22, 25 or even 18, versus Black women's and other women of color's perspective which is that your oppression is a lifelong thing. There is a political savvyness, I don't know what word to use, canniness — some difference in attitude I think between Black and white feminists. I think what it is, is like the surprise factor. There is virtually no Black person in this country who is surprised about oppression. Virtually not one. Because the thing is we have had it meted out to us from infancy on. And I think that when we are dealing with white women in coalitions, or whatever, that often we're at very different places about how you deal with a problem, how you think about a problem, how you react to a problem. Because they are coming from a perspective like, "Oh! I didn't know. I didn't know. I never knew until... I never knew until..." There is a difference when you come in to your politics because you're Black and oppressed on that level.

Bev: What I would really want to talk about is why the women's movement is basically a middle class movement. What does it mean? At least middle class in tone. I am not saying everyone in the women's movement is middle class but the thing is that I think that it is middle class women who dominate in terms of numbers and in terms of what actually gets done, and just how things get done. What gets made the priorities and what have you.

What really are the similarities and differences between women's oppression and class and racial oppression? My perception about racial oppression and class oppression is that it's something that starts from Day One.

Bar: You're born into it and it's grinding.

Bev: It's grinding. And it continues. My sense about the oppression of women is that it's something that people come to often times, but not always, in a more intellectual manner. It's something that's pointed out to them. It's something that they read about and say "Oh, yeah!". I mean even the concept of the "click", you know, that you can read about in *Ms.* magazine.

Bar: They still have "clicks"!

Bev: Right. They still talk about when you have an experience that makes you realize your oppression as a woman, makes you realize other women's oppression, you know, some revealing incident in your

life as a woman. That is a "click". Well I mean, I guess there are "clicks" among racial lines, but the thing is they're so far back in terms of class that they're almost imperceptible. It just feels to me like it's a different kind of thing.

Bar: Another thing when you talk about experiencing racial oppression and class oppression from the very beginning, if indeed you are a recipient of those oppressions what is happening to you is from moderately bad to horrible. In other words, being Black in this country there is very little about it that is mild. The oppression is extreme. Probably the only Black people where oppression is somewhat mitigated are those who have class privilege and that is certainly not the majority of Black people here. Likewise if you are a recipient of class oppression, that means that you are poor, you are working class and therefore day to day survival is almost the only thing you can focus on. The thing that's different about women's oppression is that you can be white and middle class and female and live a so-called "nice" life up until a certain point, then you begin to notice these "clicks", but I think the quality of life for the upper or middle class white woman is so far ahead of the quality of life for the Black person, the Black child, the working class child or the poor child.

Bev: I want to attempt to make comparisons between different types of oppressions. When I think of poverty, I think of constant physical and material oppression. You know, you aren't poor one day and well-to-do the next. If you're poor it's a constant thing, everyday, everyday. In some ways it's almost more constant than race because, say you're middle class and you're a Black person who is of course subject to racism, you don't necessarily experience it every single day in the same intensity, or to the same degree. Whereas, poverty is just something you experience constantly. So what I was trying to come up with is—Is there any oppression that women experience that is that total, in other words literally affects their physical well-being on a day to day basis?

Bar: Can I make a joke, Bev?

Bev: What?

Bar: Heterosexuality. Well, moving right along...

Bev: Yes, they *are* suffering...

Well, battering is maybe something, but not necessarily, only in some extreme incidences.

Bar: Well, I think in a way we're almost comparing apples and pears. We don't have a language yet or a framework as to what is the true nature of women's oppression, given where it takes place and who it comes from and how. Maybe the battered woman is not beaten every

day, but she has to wait on her husband every day and her children. She's either bored out of her mind or worrying and scraping, trying to make ends meet, both in the context of the nuclear family. Women's oppression is so organic or circular or something. One place on the circle is battering, one place is cat calls, another is rape, another place is the fact that no one takes you seriously even while you worked to put your husband through college. There's a whole range of stuff, that's why it's so hard to pin something down.

Bev: I think for purposes of analysis what we try to do is to break things down and try to separate and compare but in reality, the way women live their lives, those separations just don't work. Women don't live their lives like, "Well this part is race, and this is class, and this part has to do with women's identities," so it's confusing.

Bar: And Black women and women of color in particular don't do that. I think maybe what we have defined as an important component of Black feminism is that maybe, for the short run at least, that's all right. We don't have to rank or separate out. What we have to do is define the nature of the whole, of all the systems impinging on us.

Bev: Given these differences between us, that women are of different races and classes, how can a white middle class movement actually deal with *all* women's oppression, as it purports to do, particularly if most women are not present to represent their own interests? I think this is one of the most essential questions the movement has to face.

Bar: What we've got to look at is what is the nature of those issues that get multi-oppressed women involved in movement work. What are those issues and how might those issues be incorporated into the women's movements? I am thinking here of all the Black women who were involved in the Civil Rights Movement. Fannie Lou Hamer is a name we know, but there were countless thousands of other women whose names we don't know whose material conditions would not indicate that they would have the wherewithal to struggle politically but then they did. Even more recently, poor women have been involved in issues like tenants rights or welfare organizing, etc.

Bev: Sometimes I think maybe twenty-five to fifty years from now we might really understand what the origins of the women's movement were, much more so even than we know today. We may lose some of the proximity, but we'll gain some of the hindsight and the perspective. One of the things we might discover is that the origins of the feminist movement were basically middle class, but there are reasons for that. Already there is analysis about that from people who are somewhat anti-feminist, Marxists and leftists that have the perception that the women's movement is just an indication that we're

in an advanced stage of capitalism. They say that the fact that the women's movement developed in this country at the time it did had to do with how capitalism had developed, in other words, a high enough rate of profit or surplus. I don't know what the terminology is, exactly, but this material surplus made it possible for women to have the "leisure" to demand certain rights.

As I see it, the welfare rights movement comes out of the needs expressed and experienced by the women receiving welfare. In the same way, there is a path the women's movement has followed that originated out of the needs of middle class women.

Bar: Yes, I think that is quite verifiable . . . There is just so much class conflict in this society that it is hard for people who are economically and/or racially oppressed to believe that there are some people who may experience their oppression differently. I think that this is where the laughability of the women's movement comes in. The woman I teach a class with told me how she has a friend who was teaching John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, to a class who had a decent number of Black students in it and the Black students refused to believe that it was about white people. *Refused* to believe, you know? John Steinbeck, Great White Novelist! That's just incredible! What it shows is the class conflict, the class division, the division that is totally enforced in this society to keep people unaware of each other's situations, commonalities, etc.

## The White-Wash of Cultural Identity

Eds: *By virtue of your education, what class assumptions are made about you by white feminists? How do you experience white women trying to "whitewash" you?*

Bar: This is very complicated. There is a sociologist, a Black woman who's here in Boston, she said something very astute about this whole issue of class. She was talking about how sociologists often confuse class with lifestyle. They will throw out all their knowledge about income level, and assume people are of a different class. So they'll see a Black family who makes \$6000 a year, but the thing is they have books and they are stable and blah blah blah and all this crap, you know, they're trying to send their kids to college and they do and the sociologists say, "Well, then, they must be middle class." As she said so succinctly, "\$6000 dollars worth of money buys \$6000 worth of goods." (That would make them poor today. Twenty years ago, working class). It just depends on what you decide to spend it on. There is a difference between class in that narrow sense and values, you know? Because I think we come from that kind of home . . .

Bev: Sure. Sure.

Bar: Where there were priorities put on things that poor working class Black people weren't supposed to be thinking about.

Bev.: Yeah, it's very confusing. The fact that education was something that was always valued in our family, not just in our generation, but for generations back. I think that's where a lot of white feminists get confused about us. Because of the fact of the education we had and the emphasis on cultural development and on intellectual development that has been in our family at least for three generations, makes people think, well, we must of come from a middle class background.

Bar: Oh yeah! Sure!

Bev: It's true, we never starved. But I just get so frustrated because I feel people don't understand where we came from. When I look at the photographs in our scrapbook I just think if they looked at the house, would they understand better what our class background actually was? Because of where we were living, the size of the rooms...

Bar: The fact that there was no automatic washing machine.

Bev: The fact that when you got a chest of drawers, a dresser, and a bed in one of the bedrooms, literally there was no floor space. I think that a lot of where we came from had to do with, as you said, values and managing. One of the values is that you handled money in such a way that you made it stretch as far as you possibly could.

Bar: Don't I remember! (laughing) It was a real value that you live as decently as possible on the money you do make.

Bev: Exactly.

Bar: There was a lot of emphasis on trying.

Bev: Sometimes I do wish people could just see us in the context we grew up in, who our people are.

Bar: In order for people to understand what our background was, in order to place us, they need to have a lot of comprehension about what Black life is all about in this country, period. There is a cookbook, called *Spoonbread and Strawberry Wine* by these two Darden sisters. The reason why I mention it is because they have a family history in there. This was a successful Black family, and yet these people worked like hell! They were people who were ex-slaves. Almost anybody in their family who wanted to go to a Black college could have, but that's not nearly the same thing as a family who sent all of their sons to Harvard, all of their daughters to Smith, or whatever. There's just a different social context. Even though this is a successful Black family, there is

poverty, struggle, oppression, violence in the history of that family that is totally unrecognizable to outsiders . . .

Bev: Just like within ours. You know one of the things that I've felt for a long time being involved in the women's movement, is that there is so much about Black identity that doesn't get called into practice.

Bar: Indeed! Indeed!

Bev: And that's very upsetting to me. It really makes me think about the choices I have made, either implicitly and less consciously or very consciously. It makes me think about how I live my life because there are so many parts of our Black identity that we no longer get a chance to exercise. And that's just something that is very appalling to me.

Bar: It's just too true. It's too true.

Too appalling! I would just like to mention July 4th which happened a few days ago and watching the Black family who lives in the house behind mine as I have for the last four years and just having this feeling of longing like, you know, I'll never be in that situation. A few days later, I was talking to this white woman I know about that and she said, "Well do you really want to be sitting out there with those men?" And I said, No. But the thing is that it's the whole thing. The whole damn thing! I realize, too, it was my regret for the past, for those July 4ths that were essentially just like the one I was watching right outside my window and for the fact that it will never be that way again. Well . . .

I don't think we can even give it to each other as peers because there is a kind of family bonding across generations that is very Black that doesn't happen.

Bev: One of the things I was getting at is that there are ways we act when Black people are together that white women will never see in a largely white context. So I think that's one of the reasons that again, to use the phrase that was asked to us, they are able to "whitewash" us. Now, I don't think this is about acting white in a white context. It's about one, a lack of inspiration. Because the way you act with Black people is because they inspire the behavior. And I *do* mean inspire. And the other thing is that when you are in a white context, you think, "Well, why bother? Why waste your time?" If what you're trying to do is get things across and communicate and what-have-you, *you talk in your second language*.

Bar: This is so different from being in a Black context. For example, it just occurred to me this experience I had visiting an old friend of mine that I have known for a number of years. She was staying in this house with this regular old Black nuclear family. And the woman of the house was clearly the person who kept the whole thing together.

They had food layed back! (laughing) And the thing is it was really a lot of fun for me to see that, "pervert" that I am – that's in quotes – dyke that I am, I could sit down at a table with these middle-aged Black women who were playing pokeneo and be able to hang, you know? And it was very nice. I had a good time.

Bev: Only one question, Barbara, did you play? (laughing)

Bar: Yeah, I played for a little while. Throughout the day, there must have been twenty people in and out of the house. And it was no particular occasion, just twenty people in and out of the house. At one point, we were talking about television and the woman said, "Oh Barbara doesn't watch T.V. She's an intellectual." It was a joke and I felt good enough in that context with people I hardly knew to understand that they said that with a great deal of affection. I realized they were complimenting me and being supportive for something I had accomplished. I'm sure they felt proud of the fact that Alice, the doctor, and Barbara, who teaches at U.Mass, were sitting around on a Sunday evening. And the thing is that it was not the kind of hostility that I have sometimes experienced from my so called peers of Black women about those very same struggles and accomplishments. And it certainly is not the misunderstanding that I have gotten from white women about the meaning of that. Because of course, these people are trying to send their children to school too.

Bev: I wonder is this the trade-off, is this what everyone who has our identity has to sacrifice? One of my constant questions is how do other lesbians of color live their lives? The other question I have is – "Is this 'fly in the buttermilk' existence a function of our feminism more than our lesbianism?" To ask the question more explicitly – Do black lesbians, who do not identify as feminists and base their lives in the Black community, feel this struggle? I think the answer is that they don't all the time. It's hard to figure out.

Bar: I think the isolation is probably a result much more of being a feminist. I think this has some class factors in it. This almost takes us back to where we began because in order to be involved in this women's movement, as it stands today, you have to be able to deal with "middle-classness". And the Black women who can take it are often the ones with educational privilege.

### **Lesbian Separatism**

Eds: *Is a lesbian separatist position inherently racist? Is this position a viable political position to take?*

Bar: As we said in our collective statement (Combahee) I think we have real questions because separatism seems like such a narrow kind

of politics and also because it seems to be only viably practiced by women who have certain kinds of privilege: white-skinned privilege, class privilege. Women who don't have those kinds of privilege have to deal with this society and with the institutions of this society. They can't go to a harbor of many acres of land, and farm, and invite the goddess. Women of color are very aware that racism is not gender specific and that it affects all people of color. We have experiences that have nothing to do with being female, but are nonetheless experiences of deep oppression... and even violence.

Bev: Maybe the reason that white women got into lesbian separatism was because in being separatist they were separating themselves from white men, given how there is so much oppression in this world currently that white men have visited on people. In some ways they felt that they had to separate themselves from white men to even have a fighting chance.

Bar: So seldom is separatism involved in making real political change, affecting the institutions in the society in any direct way. If you define certain movement issues as straight women's issues, for example reproductive rights and sterilization abuse, then these identifiable sexual/political issues are ones you are not going to bother with. We have noticed how separatists in our area, instead of doing political organizing, often do zap acts. For example they might come to a meeting or series of meetings then move on their way. It is not clear what they're actually trying to change. We sometimes think of separatism as the politics without a practice.

Bev: One of the problems of separatism is that I can't see it as a philosophy that explains and analyzes the roots of all oppression and is going to go toward solving it. I think it has some validity in a more limited sphere. To begin to talk about being separate from men is viable. It has some worthwhile aspects.

Bar: Many lesbians are separatists in that sense. You are very aware of the choice – that in being a lesbian you understand that you really don't need men to define your identity, your sexuality, to make your life meaningful or simply to have a good time. That doesn't necessarily mean that you have no comprehension of the oppressions that you share with men. And you see white women with class privilege don't share oppression with white men. They're in a critical and antagonistic position whereas Black women and other women of color definitely share oppressed situations with men of their race.

What white lesbians have against lesbians of color is that they accuse us of being "male identified" because we are concerned with issues that affect our whole race. They express anger at us for not see-

ing the light. That is another aspect of how they carry on their racism. They are so narrow and adamant about that that they dismiss lesbians of color and women of color who aren't lesbians because we have some concern about what happens to the men of our race. And it's not like we like their sexism or even want to sleep with them. You can certainly be concerned as we are living here this summer in Boston when one Black man after another ends up dead.\*

Bev: It's not only being concerned, it is observing what happens – who does racist acts and who are the targets for racism. It would be incredibly dishonest to say that racism is a thing just experienced by Black women.

Bar: And also politically inexpedient. I think that people who define themselves as Black feminists certainly have decided that the bulk of their political work is in concert with other Black women. That doesn't mean that you're totally oblivious to the reality of racism. I feel that the one thing about racism is that it doesn't play favorites. Look at the history of lynching in this country. And also look at how Black women have experienced violence that is definitely racial. When you read about Black women being lynched, they aren't thinking of us as females. The horrors that we have experienced have absolutely everything to do with them *not even viewing us as women*.

Because if we are women some false chivalry would enter in and maybe certain things wouldn't happen. I've never read an account of a lynching of a white woman, or one who was pregnant. I think there's a difference between the old usual rape-murder that happens to all women and the lynching that happens specifically to Black women. A contemporary example of that is how Black women who are battered and who physically defend themselves are treated differently than white women by the courts. It's seen differently by the courts when a white middle class woman murders her husband. Then it's so-called self defense. I was just reading a case involving a Black woman in Michigan where the Black woman was sold down the river obviously because she was Black. A negative image of Black men and women got her fate delivered.

Bev: One of the most dangerous & erroneous concepts that separatists have put forward is that other oppressions, in addition to sexism, are attributed to men only. Some separatists believe that although women are racist, when men disappear and no longer rule, racism will not be a problem. It's very analogous to people who are Marxists

\*An even more striking example of the connection between a Lesbian separatist stance and the disavowal of racism as a central feminist concern can be seen in the incredibly negative responses to Elly Bulkin's fine article "Racism and Writing: Some Implications for White Lesbian Critics" coming primarily from separatists.

who say "Well, when class oppression and racism end, definitely the oppression of women and lesbians will end." What lesbian separatists are saying is that when we get rid of men, sexism and racism will end too. I think that this is one of the most racist aspects of it because it does not recognize the racism that women, including lesbians, have.

There is also a dishonesty that I have come across in some lesbians who although they do not regard themselves as separatists, they also do not acknowledge the separatism in their own lifestyles. Many lesbians who don't consider themselves separatists would never live with a man and would not go very far to befriend a man (although they may have a few token men in their lives), but they don't go any further than to disavow their separatism.

Bar: I disagree with that. The so-called disavowal is, from my perspective, the lack of need to deify or glorify those very kinds of choices. Separatists get angry at the fact that I don't make much of the fact that I don't see a man socially from one end of the week to the other. I feel they are trying to collapse political positions that I do not consider in any way trivial. Who you have parties with, as far as I am concerned, is not the bottom line of defining your political commitment.

I also want to say that I don't think that white lesbian separatists are more racist than any other white women in the women's movement that we deal with. I just think it takes different forms. White lesbian separatism has almost a studied obliviousness to instances of oppression whereas another group of feminists, for example socialists, are even more sectarian. The way their racism would manifest itself – they would know that racism was an important issue but they wouldn't be dealing with it in any way except as a theoretical radical issue. Their discomfort in dealing around women of color would be just as palpable; that attitude would be just as apparent. All white people in this country are victims of the disease of racism.

There is no such thing as a non-racist. Sometimes it's as simple as who you can laugh with, who you can cry with and who you can share meals with and whose face you can touch. There are bunches of white women for whom these things that I've mentioned are unknown experiences with women of color.

Bar: Beverly is fixing this little teddybear. She's been doing surgery on it for the last couple of hours. The bear shows remarkable stamina, like no human being. You could say that we are having a series of operations in our lives.

Bev: If it weren't for Barbara and her relationship with this person who is not myself, I wouldn't be dealing with it.

Bar: I don't see that as being relevant to this conversation.

Bev: It is relevant. I'm talking about how I got involved in this surgery.

## Homophobia in the Black Community

Eds: *Describe your experience in dealing with homophobic Black sisters.*

Bar: There's nothing to compare with how you feel when you're cut cold by your own... I think the reason that Black women are so homophobic is that attraction-repulsion thing. They have to speak out vociferously against lesbianism because if they don't they may have to deal with their own deep feelings for women. They make great cases for how fucked up it all is, and therefore cover their asses admirably. *Is homophobia more entrenched in the Black community than in the white community?*

Bev: You can argue about that until Jesus comes, really.

Bar: I really must say historically, politically there are more reasons for the Black community to be homophobic, one of them being that the women's movement has made fewer inroads into the Black community, as well as gay rights. We can assume that a community that has been subject to the ideas of the movement is going to have more consciousness. And given how up until the last couple of years the feminist movement has not touched Third World communities, we can expect their attitudes to be much as they have been in the past.

One of the reasons that I have thought for homophobic attitudes among Black women is the whole sexual stereotyping used against all Black people anyway, but especially women in relation to homosexuality – you know, the "Black bulldagger" image. Lesbianism is definitely about something sexual, a so-called deviant sexuality. So the way most Black women deal with it is to be just as rigid and closed about it as possible. White people don't have a sexual image that another oppressor community has put on them.

Bev: This country is so racist that it is possible to take many, many things and concepts that have nothing to do with race and talk about them in racial terms. Because people are so dichotomized into either black or white, it defines a continuum. This is so strict and so overwhelming in this country, you can take things that have nothing to do with race and refer to them racially.

Therefore, Black people have the option of taking things – sexuality behavior, conflicts, whatever they don't like – and saying, "That's white." Lesbianism is not the only thing seen as a white thing. A real good example is suicide. Black people say, "Yeah, suicide is a white thing."

Bar: Oh yeah, we used to believe that. And of course one felt all the worse for having considered it. I'm thinking of Ntozake Shange's play "for colored girls who have considered suicide." It's very brave. I mean, she's dealing with a lot of myths, by saying that we have even

Bev: Any behavior Black people say is despicable, they can disregard by saying this doesn't belong to the Black community. There's hardly a thing in this world in our experience that is not referred to being either Black or white, from animals on – people talking about white dogs. They weren't talking about dogs that were white in color, they were talking about dogs that belong to white people.

Bar: So often lesbianism and male homosexuality is talked about as a white disease within the Black community. It is just so negating of our lives. Very upsetting.

Eds: *Are Black women more vulnerable to homophobic attack?*

Bar: Yes, Black women are more vulnerable to homophobic attack because we don't have white skin privilege, or class privilege to fall back on if somebody wants to start a smear campaign against us. As I said in my essay, "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism," it's (heterosexual privilege) always the last to go. We don't have any of the other privileges. It really is jumping off the edge in a very fundamental way. Somebody who is already dealing with multiple oppression is more vulnerable to another kind of attack upon her identity.

Bev: I also feel that Black women are more vulnerable to physical attack as lesbians because they're Black. The stories you hear over the years of Black lesbians being attacked for being lesbian, usually by white men!

Eds: *What is the relationship between Black women's resistance to identifying as feminists, and lesbianism?*

Bar: It's real connected. Feminists have been portrayed as nothing but "lesbians" to the Black community as well. There was a considerable effort in the early seventies to turn the Black community off to feminism. You can look at publications, particularly Black publications making pronouncements about what the feminist movement was and who it reached that would trivialize it, that would say no Black women were involved, that did everything possible to prevent those coalitions between Black and white women from happening because there was a great deal of fear. Black men did not want to lose Black women as allies. And the white power structure did not want to see all women bond across racial lines because they knew that would be an unbeatable unstoppable combination. They did a very good job. You can just document those happenings during that period.

So, yes, most Black women think that to be a feminist you have to be a lesbian. And if not that, then at least you have to deal with being around lesbians. And you see, that is true. It's very hard to be in the women's movement and not be around lesbians. And if you're so homophobic that you can't deal with the thought of lesbianism then

you probably won't be involved. I think these things are changing. More and more Black women are becoming sensitive or sympathetic to the women's movement.

### Third World Women: Tokenism or Leadership

Eds: *How, as women of color, can we prevent ourselves from being tokenized by white feminists? How do you see Third World women forming the leadership in the feminist movement?*

Bev: One looks at that question about tokenism and just throws up her hands. There are so many possibilities of tokenization. One of the most tokenized situations that Barbara and I find ourselves in is when we are asked to speak at a certain place. You can be certain to be the only Black person there. You're going to be put in the position of speaking for the race, for all Black feminists. One of the things that helps is to get paid and to put it on that level so you don't feel so exploited.

Bar: I think that the service Gloria thought of having and calling it "Dial a Token" — I mean that's a good thing. For one thing it puts it out there. It's saying, "Hey, I know what you're doing and I want to get paid for it."

Another thing, try not to be the only Third World person there. I was thinking of the meeting that Cherrie went to when she was here with us. And even though there were several Third World women we were still tokenized. (laughing) I guess that I am really talking about support as opposed to defusing tokenization.

Bev: Given the state of things between Black and white women, we're going to be tokenized quite a bit. It's so hard to get around that.

Bar: A solution to tokenism is *not* racial separatism. There are definitely separatist aspects emerging among the Black and Third World feminist community and that is fine. But, ultimately, any kind of separatism is a dead end. It's good for forging identity and gathering strength, but I do feel that the strongest politics are coalition politics that cover a broad base of issues. There is no way that one oppressed group is going to topple a system by itself. Forming principled coalitions around specific issues is very important. You don't necessarily have to like or love the people you're in coalition with.

This brings me back to the issue of lesbian separatism. I read in a women's newspaper an article by a woman speaking on behalf of lesbian separatists. She claimed that separatists are more radical than other feminists. What I really feel is radical is trying to make coalitions with people who are different from you. I feel it is radical to be dealing with race and sex and class and sexual identity all at one time. I think that is really radical because it has never been done before. And it really

pisses me off that they think of themselves as radical. *I think there is a difference between being extreme and being radical.*

This is why Third World women are forming the leadership in the feminist movement because we are not one dimensional, one-issued in our political understanding. Just by virtue of our identities we certainly define race and usually define class as being fundamental issues that we have to address. The more wide-ranged your politics, the more potentially profound and transformative they are.

Bev: The way I see it, the function that Third World women play in the movement is that we're the people who throw the ball a certain distance and then the white women run to that point to pick it up. I feel we are constantly challenging white women, usually on the issues of racism but not always. We are always challenging women to go further, to be more realistic. I so often think of the speech that Sojourner Truth made not because of the contents so much but more because of the function. She says, "Now children, let's get this thing together. Let me explain what's going on here. Let my lay it out for you." I must admit that the reason I think of it so often is that I have thought of myself in that situation. "Let me explain this to you one more time, let me take you by the hand, etc." I find myself playing that role. But there's a way though that I feel that Third World women are not in actual leadership *positions* in the women's movement in terms of policy making, etc. But we certainly have the vision. We are in the position to challenge the feminist movement as it stands to date and, not out of any theoretical commitment. Our analysis of race and class oppression and our commitment to really dealing with those issues, including homophobia, is something we know we have to struggle with to insure our survival. It is organic to our very existence.

Bar: Thank you, sweetheart. Teddybear just gave me a kiss.

Bye Girls.

# Lesbianism: an Act of Resistance

## *Cheryl Clarke*

For a woman to be a lesbian in a male-supremacist, capitalist, misogynist, racist, homophobic, imperialist culture, such as that of North America, is an act of resistance. (A resistance that should be championed throughout the world by all the forces struggling for liberation from the same slave master.) No matter how a woman lives out her lesbianism – in the closet, in the state legislature, in the bedroom – she has rebelled against becoming the slave master's concubine, viz. the male-dependent female, the female heterosexual. This rebellion is dangerous business in patriarchy. Men at all levels of privilege, of all classes and colors have the potential to act out legalistically, moralistically, and violently when they cannot colonize women, when they cannot circumscribe our sexual, productive, reproductive, creative prerogatives and energies. And the lesbian – that woman who, as Judy Grahn says, "has taken a woman lover"<sup>1</sup> – has succeeded in resisting the slave master's imperialism in that one sphere of her life. The lesbian has decolonized her body. She has rejected a life of servitude implicit in Western, heterosexual relationships and has accepted the potential of mutuality in a lesbian relationship – *roles* notwithstanding.

Historically, this culture has come to identify lesbians as women, who over time, engage in a range and variety of sexual-emotional relationships with women. I, for one, identify a woman as a lesbian who says she is. Lesbianism is a recognition, an awakening, a reawakening of our passion for each (woman) other (woman) and for same (woman). This passion will ultimately reverse the heterosexual imperialism of male culture. Women, through the ages, have fought and died rather than deny that passion. In her essay, "The Meaning of Our Love for Women Is What We Have Constantly to Expand" Adrienne Rich states:

... Before any kind of feminist movement existed, or could exist, lesbians existed: women who loved women, who refused to comply with behavior demanded of women, who refused to define themselves in relation to men. Those women, our foremothers, millions whose names we do not know, were tortured and burned as witches, slandered in religious and later in "scientific" tracts, portrayed in art and literature as bizarre, amoral, destructive, decadent women. For a long time, the lesbian has been a personification of feminine evil.

... Lesbians have been forced to live between two cultures, both male-dominated, each of which has denied and endangered our existence... Heterosexual, patriarchal culture has driven lesbians into secrecy and guilt, often to self-hatred and suicide.<sup>2</sup>

The evolving synthesis of lesbianism and feminism – two women-centered and powered ideologies – is breaking that silence and secrecy. The following analysis is offered as one small cut against that stone of silence and secrecy. It is not intended to be original or all-inclusive. I dedicate this work to all the women hidden from history whose suffering and triumph have made it possible for me to call my name out loud.\*

The woman who embraces lesbianism as an ideological, political, and philosophical means of liberation of all women from heterosexual tyranny must also identify with the world-wide struggle of all women to end male-supremacist tyranny at all levels. As far as I am concerned, any woman who calls herself a feminist must commit herself to the liberation of *all* women from *coerced* heterosexuality as it manifests itself in the family, the state, and on Madison Avenue. The lesbian-feminist struggles for the liberation of all people from patriarchal domination through heterosexism and for the transformation of all socio-political structures, systems, and relationships that have been degraded and corrupted under centuries of male domination.

However, there is no one kind of lesbian, no one kind of lesbian behavior, and no one kind of lesbian relationship. Also there is no one kind of response to the pressures that lesbians labor under to survive as lesbians. Not all women who are involved in sexual-emotional relationships with women call themselves lesbians or identify with any particular lesbian community. Many women are only lesbians to a particular community and *pass* as heterosexuals as they traffic among enemies. (This is analogous to being black and passing for white with only one's immediate family knowing one's true origins.) Yet, those who hide in the closet of heterosexual presumption are sooner or later discovered. The "nigger-in-the-woodpile" story retells itself. Many women are politically active as lesbians, but may fear holding hands with their lovers as they traverse heterosexual turf. (This response to heterosexual predominance can be likened to the reaction of the black student who integrates a predominately white dormitory and who fears leaving the door of her room open when she

\*I would like to give particular acknowledgment to the Combahee River Collective's "A Black Feminist Statement". Because this document espouses "struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression," it has become a manifesto of radical feminist thought, action and practice.

plays gospel music.) There is the woman who engages in sexual-emotional relationships with women and labels herself *bisexual*. (This is comparable to the Afro-American whose skin-color indicates her mixed ancestry yet who calls herself "mulatto" rather than black.) Bisexual is a safer label than lesbian, for it posits the possibility of a relationship with a man, regardless of how infrequent or non-existent the female bisexual's relationships with men might be. And then there is the lesbian who is a lesbian anywhere and everywhere and who is in direct and constant confrontation with heterosexual presumption, privilege, and oppression. (Her struggle can be compared to that of the Civil Rights activist of the 1960's who was out there on the streets for freedom, while so many of us viewed the action on the television.)

Wherever we, as lesbians, fall along this very generalized political continuum, we must know that the institution of heterosexuality is a die-hard custom through which male-supremacist institutions insure their own perpetuity and control over us. Women are kept, maintained, and contained through terror, violence, and spray of semen. It is profitable for our colonizers to confine our bodies and alienate us from our own life processes as it was profitable for the European to enslave the African and destroy all memory of a prior freedom and self-determination – Alex Haley notwithstanding. And just as the foundation of Western capitalism depended upon the North Atlantic slave trade, the system of patriarchal domination is buttressed by the subjugation of women through heterosexuality. So, patriarchs must extoll the boy-girl dyad as "natural" to keep us straight and compliant in the same way the European had to extoll Caucasian superiority to justify the African slave trade. Against that historic backdrop, *the woman who chooses to be a lesbian lives dangerously*.

As a member of the largest and second most oppressed group of people of color, as a woman whose slave and ex-slave foremothers suffered some of the most brutal racist, male-supremacist imperialism in Western history, the black lesbian has had to survive also the psychic mutilation of heterosexual superiority. The black lesbian is coerced into the experience of institutional racism – like every other nigger in America – and must suffer as well the homophobic sexism of the black political community, some of whom seem to have forgotten so soon the pain of rejection, denial, and repression sanctioned by racist America. While most political black lesbians do not give a damn if white America is negrophobic, it becomes deeply problematic when the contemporary black political community (another male-dominated and male-identified institution) rejects us because of our commitment to women and women's liberation. Many black male members of that community seem still not to understand the historic

connection between the oppression of African peoples in North America and the universal oppression of women. As the women's rights activist and abolitionist, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, pointed out during the 1850's, racism and sexism have been produced by the same animal, *viz.* "the white Saxon man."

Gender oppression (i.e. the male exploitation and control of women's productive and reproductive energies on the specious basis of a biological difference) originated from the first division of labor, *viz.* that between women and men, and resulted in the accumulation of private property, patriarchal usurpation of "mother right" or matri-lineage, and the duplicitous, male-supremacist institution of heterosexual monogamy (for women only). Sexual politics, therefore, mirror the exploitative, class-bound relationship between the white slave master and the African slave – and the impact of both relationships (between black and white and woman and man) has been residual beyond emancipation and suffrage. The ruling class white man had a centuries-old model for his day-to-day treatment of the African slave. Before he learned to justify the African's continued enslavement and the ex-slave's continued disfranchisement with arguments of the African's divinely ordained mental and moral inferiority to himself (a smokescreen for his capitalist greed) the white man learned, within the structure of heterosexual monogamy and under the system of patriarchy, to relate to black people – slave or free – as a man *relates* to a woman, *viz.* as property, as a sexual commodity, as a servant, as a source of free or cheap labor, and as an innately inferior being.

Although counter-revolutionary, Western heterosexuality, which advances male-supremacy, continues to be upheld by many black people, especially black men, as the most desired state of affairs between men and women. This observation is borne out on the pages of our most scholarly black publications to our most commercial black publications, which view the issue of black male and female relationships through the lens of heterosexual bias. But this is to be expected, as historically heterosexuality was one of our only means of power over our condition as slaves and one of two means we had at our disposal to appease the white man.

Now, as ex-slaves, black men have more latitude to oppress black women, because the brothers no longer have to compete directly with the white man for control of black women's bodies. Now, the black man can assume the "master" role, and he can attempt to tyrannize black women. The black man may view the lesbian – who cannot be manipulated or seduced sexually by him – in much the same way the white slave master once viewed the black male slave, *viz.* as some perverse caricature of manhood threatening his position of dominance

over the female body. This view, of course, is a "neurotic illusion" imposed on black men by the dictates of male supremacy, which the black man can never fulfill because he lacks the capital means and racial privilege.

Historically, the myth in the Black world is that there are only two free people in the United States, the white man and the black woman. The myth was established by the Black man in the long period of his frustration when he longed to be free to have the material and social advantages of his oppressor, the white man. On examination of the myth this so-called freedom was based on the sexual prerogatives taken by the white man on the Black female. It was fantasized by the Black man that she enjoyed it.<sup>3</sup>

While lesbian-feminism does threaten the black man's predatory control of black women, its goal as a political ideology and philosophy is not to take the black man's or any man's position on top.

Black lesbians who do work within "by-for-about-black-people" groups or organizations either pass as "straight" or relegate our lesbianism to the so-called "private" sphere. The more male-dominated or black nationalist bourgeois the organization or group, the more resistant to change, and thus, the more homophobic and anti-feminist. In these sectors, we learn to keep a low profile.

In 1979, at the annual conference of a regional chapter of the National Black Social Workers, the national director of that body was given a standing ovation for the following remarks:

Homosexuals are even accorded minority status now. . . . And white women, too. And some of you black women who call yourselves feminists will be sitting up in meetings with the same white women who will be stealing your men on the sly.

This type of indictment of women's revolution and implicitly of lesbian liberation is voiced throughout the bourgeois black (male) movement. But this is the insidious nature of male supremacy. While the black man may consider racism his primary oppression, he is hard-put to recognize that sexism is inextricably bound up with the racism the black woman must suffer, nor can he see that no women (or men for that matter) will be liberated from the original "master-slave" relationship, viz. that between men and women, until we are all liberated from the false premise of heterosexual superiority. This corrupted, predatory relationship between men and women is the foundation of the master-slave relationship between white and black people in the United States.

The tactic many black men use to intimidate black women from embracing feminism is to reduce the conflicts between white women and black women to a "tug-o-war" for the black penis. And since the black lesbian, as stated previously, is not interested in his penis, she

undermines the black man's only source of power over her, viz. his heterosexuality. Black lesbians and all black women involved in the struggle for liberation must resist this manipulation and seduction.

The dyke, like every dyke in America, is everywhere – in the home, in the street, on the welfare, unemployment, and social security rolls, raising children, working in factories, in the armed forces, on television, in the public school system, in all the professions, going to college or graduate school, in middle-management, et. al. The black dyke, like every other non-white and working class and poor woman in America, has not suffered the luxury, privilege, or oppression of being dependent on men, even though our male counterparts have been present, have shared our lives, work, and struggle, and, in addition, have undermined our "human dignity" along the way like most men in patriarchy, the imperialist family of man. But we could never depend on them "to take care of us" on their resources alone – and, of course, it is another "neurotic illusion" imposed on our fathers, brothers, lovers, husbands that they are supposed to "take care of us" because we are women. Translate: "to take care of us" equals "to control us." Our brothers', fathers', lovers', husbands' only power is their manhood. And unless manhood is somehow embellished by white skin and generations of private wealth, it has little currency in racist, capitalist patriarchy. The black man, for example, is accorded native elite or colonial guard or vigilante status over black women in imperialist patriarchy. He is an overseer for the slave master. Because of his maleness he given access to certain privileges, e.g. employment, education, a car, life insurance, a house, some nice vines. He is usually a rabid heterosexual. He is, since emancipation, allowed to raise a "legitimate" family, allowed to have his piece of turf, viz. his wife and children. That is as far as his dictatorship extends for, if his wife decides that she wants to leave that home for whatever reason, he does not have the power or resources to seduce her otherwise if she is determined to throw off the benign or malicious yoke of dependency. The ruling class white man on the other hand, has always had the power to count women among his pool of low-wage labor, his means of production. Most recently, he has "allowed" women the right to sue for divorce, to apply for AFDC, and to be neocolonized.

Traditionally, poor black men and women who banded together and stayed together and raised children together did not have the luxury to cultivate dependence among the members of their families. So, the black dyke, like most black women, has been conditioned to be self-sufficient, i.e. not dependent on men. For me personally, the conditioning to be self-sufficient and the predominance of female role models in my life are the roots of my lesbianism. Before I became a les-

bian, I often wondered why I was expected to give up, avoid, and trivialize the recognition and encouragement I felt from women in order to pursue the tenuous business of heterosexuality. And I am not unique.

As political lesbians, i.e. lesbians who are resisting the prevailing culture's attempts to keep us invisible and powerless, we must become more visible (particularly black and other lesbians of color) to our sisters hidden in their various closets, locked in prisons of self-hate and ambiguity, afraid to take the ancient act of woman-bonding beyond the sexual, the private, the personal. I am not trying to reify lesbianism or feminism. I am trying to point out that lesbian-feminism has the potential of reversing and transforming a major component in the system of women's oppression, viz. predatory heterosexuality. If radical lesbian-feminism purports an anti-racist, anti-classist, anti-woman-hating vision of bonding as mutual, reciprocal, as infinitely negotiable, as freedom from antiquated gender prescriptions and proscriptions, *then all people struggling to transform the character of relationships in this culture have something to learn from lesbians.*

The woman who takes a woman lover lives dangerously in patriarchy. And woe betide her even more if she chooses as her lover a woman who is not of her race. The silence among lesbian-feminists regarding the issue of lesbian relationships between black and white women in America is caused by none other than the centuries-old taboo and laws in the United States against relationships between people of color and those of the Caucasian race. Speaking heterosexually, the laws and taboos were a reflection of the patriarchal slave master's attempts to control his property via controlling his lineage through the institution of monogamy (for women only) and justified the taboos and laws with the argument that purity of the Caucasian race must be preserved (as well as its supremacy). However, we know that his racist and racialist laws and taboos did not apply to him in terms of the black slave woman just as his classist laws and taboos regarding the relationship between the ruling class and the indentured servants did not apply to him in terms of the white woman servant he chose to rape. The offspring of any unions between the white ruling class slave master and the black slave woman or white woman indentured servant could not legally inherit their white or ruling class sire's property or name, just their mothers' condition of servitude.

The taboo against black and white people relating at any other level than master-slave, superior-inferior has been propounded in America to keep black women and men and white women and men, who share a common oppression at the hands of the ruling class white man, from organizing against that common oppression. We, as black lesbians,

must vehemently resist being bound by the white man's racist, sexist laws, which have endangered potential intimacy of any kind between whites and blacks.

It cannot be presumed that black lesbians involved in love, work, and social relationships with white lesbians do so out of self-hate and denial of our racial-cultural heritage, identities, and oppression. Why should a woman's commitment to the struggle be questioned or accepted on the basis of her lover's or comrade's skin color? White lesbians engaged likewise with black lesbians or any lesbians of color cannot be assumed to be acting out of some perverse, guilt-ridden racialist desire.

I personally am tired of going to events, conferences, workshops, planning sessions that involve a coming together of black and other lesbians of color for political or even social reasons and listening to black lesbians relegate feminism to white women, castigate black women who propose forming coalitions with predominantly white feminist groups, minimize the white woman's oppression and exaggerate her power, and then finally judge that a black lesbian's commitment to the liberation of black women is dubious because she does not sleep with a black woman. All of us have to accept or reject allies on the basis of politics not on the specious basis of skin color. *Have not black people suffered betrayal from our own people?*

Yes, black women's experiences of misogyny are different from white women's. However, they all add up to how the patriarchal slave master decided to oppress us. We both fought each other for his favor, approval, and protection. Such is the effect of imperialist, heterosexist patriarchy. Shulamith Firestone, in the essay, "Racism: the Sexism of the Family of Man", purports this analysis of the relationship between white and black women:

How do the women of this racial Triangle feel about each other?

Divide and conquer: Both women have grown hostile to each other, white women feeling contempt for the "sluts" with no morals, black women feeling envy for the pampered "powder puffs." The black woman is jealous of the white woman's legitimacy, privilege, and comfort, but she also feels deep contempt... Similarly the white woman's contempt for the black woman is mixed with envy: for the black woman's greater sexual license, for her gutsiness, for her freedom from the marriage bind. For after all, the black woman is not under the thumb of a man, but is pretty much her own boss to come and go, to leave the house, to work (much as it is degrading work) or to be "shiftless". What the white woman doesn't know is that the black woman, not under the thumb of *one* man, can now be squashed by all. There is no alternative for either of them than the choice between being public or private property, but because each

still believes that the other is getting away with something both can be fooled into mis-channeling their frustration onto each other rather than onto the real enemy, 'The Man.'<sup>4</sup>

Though her statement of the choices black and white women have under patriarchy in America has merit, Firestone analyzes only a specific relationship i.e. between the ruling class white woman and slave or ex-slave black woman.

Because of her whiteness, the white woman of all classes has been accorded, as the black man has because of his maleness, certain privileges in racist patriarchy, e.g. indentured servitude as opposed to enslavement, exclusive right to public assistance until the 1960's, "legitimate" offspring and (if married into the middle/upper class) the luxury to live on her husband's income, etc.

The black woman, having neither maleness nor whiteness, has always had her heterosexuality, which white men and black men have manipulated by force and at will. Further, she, like all poor people, has had her labor, which the white capitalist man has also taken and exploited at will. These capabilities have allowed black women minimal access to the crumbs thrown at black men and white women. So, when the black woman and the white woman become lovers, we bring that history and all those questions to the relationship as well as other people's problems with the relationships. The taboo against intimacy between white and black people has been internalized by us and simultaneously defied by us. If we, as lesbian-feminists, defy the taboo, then we begin to transform the history of relationships between black women and white women.

In her essay, "Disloyal to Civilization: Feminism, Racism, Gynephobia," Rich calls for feminists to attend to the complexities of the relationship between black and white women in the United States. Rich queries:

What caricatures of bloodless fragility and broiling sensuality still imprint our psyches, and where did we receive these imprints?

What happened between the several thousand northern white women and southern black women who together taught in the schools founded under Reconstruction by the Freedmen's Bureau, side by side braving the Ku Klux Klan harassment, terrorism, and the hostility of white communities?\*5

\*One such example is the Port Royal Experiment (1862), the precursor of the Freedmen's Bureau. Port Royal was a program of relief for "freed men and women" in the South Carolina Sea Islands, organized under the auspices of the Boston Education Commission and the Freedmen's Relief Assoc. in New York and the Port Royal Relief Assoc. in Philadelphia, and sanctioned by the Union Army and the Federal Government. See *The Journal of Charlotte Forten* on the 'Port Royal Experiment' (Beacon Press, Boston, 1969). Through her Northern bourgeois myopia, Forten recounts her experiences as a black teacher among the black freed men and women and her Northern white women peers.

So, all of us would do well to stop fighting each other for our space at the bottom, because there ain't no more room. We have spent so much time hating ourselves. Time to love ourselves. And that, for all lesbians, as lovers, as comrades, as freedom fighters, is the final resistance.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Grahn, Judy. "The Common Woman", *The Work of a Common Woman*. Diana Press. Oakland, 1978, p. 67.

<sup>2</sup>Rich, Adrienne, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978*. W.W. Norton. New York, 1979, p. 225.

<sup>3</sup>Robinson, Pat and Group, "Poor Black Women's Study Papers by Poor Black Women of Mount Vernon, New York", in T. Cade (ed). *The Black Woman: An Anthology*. New American Library. New York. 1970. p. 194.

<sup>4</sup>Firestone, Shulamith, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*. Bantam Books, New York, 1972, p. 113.

<sup>5</sup>Rich, op. cit., p. 298.

# Lowriding Through the Women's Movement

## *Barbara Noda*

One road winds down the mountains, past apple orchards, and into the half-awake town of Watsonville, California. Not quite disturbed by the university students of Santa Cruz or the tourists of Monterey, an eye-distance from the blue roar of Pacific, Watsonville is still a sleepy town where lowriders drag main in search of non-existent action. The lowriders are left to their own destiny, to cruise against a backdrop of fog-shrouded artichokes when the sun has gone down. Thorny spears thrust into a star-studded night, and the lowriders bail out at deserted beaches, drink six-packs of beer and stare at the foam.

Sharon's kitchen in Watsonville was the center of a different kind of activity. We assembled in the evening: Sharon; Sharon's zealous sister who would soon be led to Christianity; a black lesbian who lived in a cottage behind Sharon's house who was an unforgivable romantic and who probably led a past life as an opera singer; a Chicana, self-named after a revolutionary, struggling to earn a doctorate in the University of California's ethereal mountaintop program called "History of Consciousness"; and myself.

We were probably among the first of our kind back in the early seventies: a third world women's group. There, in the quiet of residential Watsonville, we discussed the "colonized" and the "colonizer". Sharon distributed green tea, Chinese pastries, and Aime Cesaire's *Discourse on Colonialism*. As the evening wound down we stormed out together – third world sisters – and dragged main with the masses, drank beer and howled at the empty, innocent face of the sky who oppressed us.

Whether *Race* was our answer or our question, certainly it held us together if even for a few brief months in our lives during a time when *nothing else* in the world that we saw around us had any solid identity or meaning. It was a vaporous season, like a lost summer, and desperately we needed to hold onto each other and croon a few songs from the underworld.

Now, so many years later, it is still difficult to believe that Sharon is dead. I keep thinking that one day I'll see her in the midst of a demonstration, shouting through a megaphone and glaring into the pale eye who dares to tell her to "go back to where you came from." She is *not* from China. But perhaps shouting into a megaphone was not her way. I remember the last time I saw her in newly established living quarters

in the Outer Mission. We shared a sweet piece of watermelon that floated like a bright red iceberg in the middle of our plate, unmistakably a bite of paradise. Old differences over "correct" politics slithered harmlessly from our mouths with the black seeds we spit out. We talked about Asian American poetry and Tule Lake, co-existed for a moment then parted ways.

For one who was so sincerely dedicated to the "cause" for her to be broadsided while driving past the pine and sand that border Highway One and killed instantly is a mystery beyond all comprehension. There is no *understanding* of such things. Maybe we knew something then that we needed to forget in order to live more meaningful lives, when we joined the lowriders in the flagrant pursuit of their destiny.



I rode the elevator down from the 21st floor, marched to the bakery where Sharon used to buy pastries on her visits to the city, and ate my lunch in Portsmouth Square. I had been plugged into a dictaphone all morning and Chinatown squirmed with life.

Pigeons softly gurgling. Game tables obscured and surrounded by the beating hearts of groups of men. Women carrying bags of groceries nearly flying above sedate heads, like kites trailed by small children. Old people deciphering the ancient language of their wornout books. The red benches. My red sweater. The color RED sang out at me, and I was a glorious part of it.

Across the street was the leveled site of the I-Hotel. A fortress barricaded with the strategy of ardent organizers, it was now a parking lot. The damp cold of the building, the loneliness of the tenants and of us (I was not sure whether we had been the youthful guardians of the building or stray cats who had wandered in) had been demolished into a flattened expanse of less than nothing. Even nothing speaks. This was merely city grime, fumes, noise, pollution. The humanity that had kept us warm and huddled together through makeshift Christmas dinners, internal crises and external warfare had been strained from the air. Not even a mirage existed, only the city life around me.

## Letter to Ma

### Merle Woo

Dear Ma,

January, 1980

I was depressed over Christmas, and when New Year's rolled around, do you know what one of my resolves was? Not to come by and see you as much anymore. I had to ask myself why I get so down when I'm with you, my mother, who has focused so much of her life on me, who has endured so much; one who I am proud of and respect so deeply for simply surviving.

I suppose that one of the main reasons is that when I leave your house, your pretty little round white table in the dinette where we sit while you drink tea (with only three specks of Jasmine) and I smoke and drink coffee, I am down because I believe there are chasms between us. When you say, "I support you, honey, in everything you do except . . . except . . ." I know you mean except my speaking out and writing of my anger at all those things that have caused those chasms. When you say I shouldn't be so ashamed of Daddy, former gambler, retired clerk of a "gook suey" store, because of the time when I was six and saw him humiliated on Grant Avenue by two white cops, I know you haven't even been listening to me when I have repeatedly said that I am not ashamed of him, not you, not who we are. When you ask, "Are you so angry because you are unhappy?" I know that we are not talking to each other. Not with understanding, although many words have passed between us, many hours, many afternoons at that round table with Daddy out in the front room watching television, and drifting out every once in a while to say "Still talking?" and getting more peanuts that are so bad for his health.

We talk and we talk and I feel frustrated by your censorship. I know it is unintentional and unconscious. But whatever I have told you about the classes I was teaching, or the stories I was working on, you've always forgotten within a month. Maybe you can't listen – because maybe when you look in my eyes, you will, as you've always done, sense more than what we're actually saying, and that makes you fearful. Do you see your repressed anger manifested in me? What doors would groan wide open if you heard my words with complete understanding? Are you afraid that your daughter is breaking out of our shackles, and into total anarchy? That your daughter has turned

into a crazy woman who advocates not only equality for Third World people, for women, but for gays as well? Please don't shudder, Ma, when I speak of homosexuality. Until we can all present ourselves to the world in our completeness, as fully and beautifully as we see ourselves naked in our bedrooms, we are not free.

After what seems like hours of talking, I realize it is not talking at all, but the filling up of time with sounds that say, "I am your daughter, you are my mother, and we are keeping each other company, and that is enough." But it is not enough because my life has been formed by your life. Together we have lived one hundred and eleven years in this country as yellow women, and it is not enough to enunciate words and words and words and then to have them only mean that we have been keeping each other company. I desperately want you to understand me and my work, Ma, to know what I am doing! When you distort what I say, like thinking I am against all "caucasians" or that I am ashamed of Dad, then I feel anger and more frustration and want to slash out, not at you, but at those external forces which keep us apart. What deepens the chasms between us are our different reactions to those forces. Yours has been one of silence, self-denial, self-effacement; you believing it is your fault that you never fully experienced self-pride and freedom of choice. But listen, Ma, only with a deliberate consciousness is my reaction different from yours.

When I look at you, there are images: images of you as a little ten-year-old Korean girl, being sent alone from Shanghai to the United States, in steerage with only one skimpy little dress, being sick and lonely on Angel Island for three months; then growing up in a "Home" run by white missionary women. Scrubbing floors on your hands and knees, hauling coal in heavy metal buckets up three flights of stairs, tending to the younger children, putting hot bricks on your cheeks to deaden the pain from the terrible toothaches you always had. Working all your life as maid, waitress, salesclerk, office worker, mother. But throughout there is an image of you as strong and courageous, and persevering: climbing out of windows to escape from the Home, then later, from an abusive first husband. There is so much more to these images than I can say, but I think you know what I mean. Escaping out of windows offered only temporary respites; surviving is an everyday chore. You gave me, physically, what you never had, but there was a spiritual, emotional legacy you passed down which was reinforced by society: self-contempt because of our race, our sex, our sexuality. For deeply ingrained in me, Ma, there has been that strong, compulsive force to sink into self-contempt, passivity, and despair. I am sure that my fifteen years of alcohol abuse have not been forgotten by either of us, nor my suicidal depressions.

Now, I know you are going to think that I hate and despise you for your self-hatred, for your isolation. But I don't. Because in spite of your withdrawal, in spite of your loneliness, you have not only survived, but been beside me in the worst of times when your company meant everything in the world to me. I just need more than that now, Ma. I have taken and taken from you in terms of needing you to mother me, to be by my side, and I need, now, to take from you two more things: understanding and support for who I am now and my work.

We are Asian American women and the reaction to our identity is what causes the chasms instead of connections. But do you realize, Ma, that I could never have reacted the way I have if you had not provided for me the opportunity to be free of the binds that have held you down, and to be in the process of self-affirmation? Because of your life, because of the physical security you have given me: my education, my full stomach, my clothed and starched back, my piano and dancing lessons – all those gifts you never received – I saw myself as having worth; now I begin to love myself more, see our potential, and fight for just that kind of social change that will affirm me, my race, my sex, my heritage. And while I affirm myself, Ma, I affirm you.

Today, I am satisfied to call myself either an Asian American Feminist or Yellow Feminist. The two terms are inseparable because race and sex are an integral part of me. This means that I am working with others to realize pride in culture and women and heritage (the heritage that is the exploited yellow immigrant: Daddy and you). Being a Yellow Feminist means being a community activist and a humanist. It does not mean "separatism," either by cutting myself off from non-Asians or men. It does not mean retaining the same power structure and substituting women in positions of control held by men. It does mean fighting the whites and the men who abuse us, straight-jacket us and tape our mouths; it means changing the economic class system and psychological forces (sexism, racism, and homophobia) that really hurt all of us. And I do this, not in isolation, but in the community.

We no longer can afford to stand back and watch while an insatiable elite ravages and devours resources which are enough for all of us. The obstacles are so huge and overwhelming that often I do become cynical and want to give up. And if I were struggling alone, I know I would never even attempt to put into action what I believe in my heart, that (and this is primarily because of you, Ma) Yellow Women are strong and have the potential to be powerful and effective leaders.

I can hear you asking now, "Well, what do you mean by 'social change and leadership?' And how are you going to go about it?" To begin with we must wipe out the circumstances that keep us down in

silence and self-effacement. Right now, my techniques are education and writing. Yellow Feminist means being a core for change, and that core means having the belief in our potential as human beings. I will work with anyone, support anyone, who shares my sensibility, my objectives. But there are barriers to unity: white women who are racist, and Asian American men who are sexist. My very being declares that those two groups do not share my complete sensibility. I would be fragmented, mutilated, if I did not fight against racism and sexism together.

And this is when the pain of the struggle hits home. How many white women have taken on the responsibility to educate themselves about Third World people, their history, their culture? How many white women really think about the stereotypes they retain as truth about women of color? But the perpetuation of dehumanizing stereotypes is really very helpful for whites; they use them to justify their giving us the lowest wages and all the work they don't want to perform. Ma, how can we believe things are changing when as a nurse's aide during World War II, you were given only the tasks of changing the bed linen, removing bed pans, taking urine samples, and then only three years ago as a retired volunteer worker in a local hospital, white women gave themselves desk jobs and gave you, at sixty-nine, the same work you did in 1943? Today you speak more fondly of being a nurse's aide during World War II and how proud you are of the fact that the Red Cross showed its appreciation for your service by giving you a diploma. Still in 1980, the injustices continue. I can give you so many examples of groups which are "feminist" in which women of color were given the usual least important tasks, the shitwork, and given no say in how that group is to be run. Needless to say, those Third World women, like you, dropped out, quit.

Working in writing and teaching, I have seen how white women condescend to Third World women because they reason that because of our oppression, which they know nothing about, we are behind them and their "progressive ideas" in the struggle for freedom. They don't even look at history! At the facts! How we as Asian American women have always been fighting for more than mere survival, but were never acknowledged because we were in our communities, invisible, but not inaccessible.

And I get so tired of being the instant resource for information on Asian American women. Being the token representative, going from class to class, group to group, bleeding for white women so they can have an easy answer – and then, and this is what really gets to me – they usually leave to never continue their education about us on their own.

To the racist white female professor who says, "If I have to watch everything I say I wouldn't say anything," I want to say, "Then get out of teaching."

To the white female poet who says, "Well, frankly, I believe that politics and poetry don't necessarily have to go together," I say, "Your little taste of white privilege has deluded you into thinking that you don't have to fight against sexism in this society. You are talking to me from your own isolation and your own racism. If you feel that you don't have to fight for me, that you don't have to speak out against capitalism, the exploitation of human and natural resources, then you in your silence, your inability to make connections, are siding with a system that will eventually get you, after it has gotten me. And if you think that's not a political stance, you're more than simply deluded, you're crazy!"

This is the same white voice that says, "I am writing about and looking for themes that are 'universal.'" Well, most of the time when "universal" is used, it is just a euphemism for "white": white themes, white significance, white culture. And denying minority groups their rightful place and time in U.S. history is simply racist.

Yes, Ma, I am mad. I carry the anger from my own experience and the anger you couldn't afford to express, and even that is often misinterpreted no matter how hard I try to be clear about my position. A white woman in my class said to me a couple of months ago, "I feel that Third World women hate me and that *they* are being racist; I'm being stereotyped, and I've never been part of the ruling class." I replied, "Please try to understand. Know our history. Know the racism of whites, how deep it goes. Know that we are becoming ever more intolerant of those people who let their ignorance be their excuse for their complacency, their liberalism, when this country (this world!) is going to hell in a handbasket. Try to understand that our distrust is from experience, and that our distrust is powerless. Racism is an essential part of the status quo, *powerful*, and continues to keep us down. It is a rule taught to all of us from birth. Is it no wonder that we fear there are no exceptions?"

And as if the grief we go through working with white women weren't enough; so close to home, in our community, and so very painful, is the lack of support we get from some of our Asian American brothers. Here is a quote from a rather prominent male writer ranting on about a Yellow "sister":

... I can only believe that such blatant sucking off of the identity is the work of a Chinese American woman, another Jade Snow Wong Pochahontas yellow. Pussywhipped again. Oh, damn, pussywhipped again.

Chinese American woman: "another Jade Snow Wong Pochahontas yellow." According to him, Chinese American women sold out – are contemptuous of their culture, pathetically strain all their lives to be white, hate Asian American men, and so marry white men (the John Smiths) – or just like Pochahontas: we rescue white men while betraying our fathers; then marry white men, get baptized, and go to dear old England to become curiosities of the civilized world. Whew! Now, that's an indictment! (Of all women of color.) Some of the male writers in the Asian American community seem never to support us. They always expect us to support them, and you know what? We almost always do. Anti-Yellow men? Are they kidding? We go to their readings, buy and read and comment on their books, and try to keep up a dialogue. And they accuse us of betrayal, are resentful because we do readings together as Women, and so often do not come to our performances. And all the while we hurt because we are rejected by our brothers. The Pochahontas image used by a Chinese American man points out a tragic truth: the white man and his ideology are still over us and between us. These men of color, with clear vision, fight the racism in white society, but have bought the white male definition of "masculinity": men only should take on the leadership in the community because the qualities of "originality, daring, physical courage, and creativity" are "traditionally masculine."

Some Asian men don't seem to understand that by supporting Third World women and fighting sexism, they are helping themselves as well. I understand all too clearly how dehumanized Dad was in this country. To be a Chinese man in America is to be a victim of both racism and sexism. He was made to feel he was without strength, identity, and purpose. He was made to feel soft and weak, whose only job was to serve whites. Yes, Ma, at one time I was ashamed of him because I thought he was "womanly." When those two white cops said, "Hey, fat boy, where's our meat?" he left me standing there on Grant Avenue while he hurried over to his store to get it; they kept complaining, never satisfied, "That piece isn't good enough. What's the matter with you, fat boy? Don't you have respect? Don't wrap that meat in newspapers either; use the good stuff over there." I didn't know that he spent a year and a half on Angel Island; that we could never have our right names; that he lived in constant fear of being deported; that, like you, he worked two full-time jobs most of his life; that he was mocked and ridiculed because he speaks "broken English." And Ma, I was so ashamed after that experience when I was only six years old that I never held his hand again.

Today, as I write to you of all these memories, I feel even more deeply hurt when I realize how many people, how so many people, because of racism and sexism, fail to see what power we sacrifice by not joining hands.

But not all white women are racist, and not all Asian American men are sexist. And we choose to trust them, love and work with them. And there are visible changes. Real tangible, positive changes. The changes I love to see are those changes within ourselves.

Your grandchildren, my children, Emily and Paul. That makes three generations. Emily loves herself. Always has. There are shades of self-doubt but much less than in you or me. She says exactly what she thinks, most of the time, either in praise or in criticism of herself or others. And at sixteen she goes after whatever she wants, usually center stage. She trusts and loves people, regardless of race or sex (but, of course, she's cautious), loves her community and works in it, speaks up against racism and sexism at school. Did you know that she got Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker on her reading list for a Southern Writers class when there were only white authors? That she insisted on changing a script done by an Asian American man when she saw that the depiction of the character she was playing was sexist? That she went to a California State House Conference to speak out for Third World students' needs?

And what about her little brother, Paul? Twelve years old. And remember, Ma? At one of our Saturday Night Family Dinners, how he lectured Ronnie (his uncle, yet!) about how he was a male chauvinist? Paul told me once how he knew he had to fight to be Asian American, and later he added that if it weren't for Emily and me, he wouldn't have to think about feminist stuff too. He says he can hardly enjoy a movie or TV program anymore because of the sexism. Or comic books. And he is very much aware of the different treatment he gets from adults: "You have to do everything right," he said to Emily, "and I can get away with almost anything."

Emily and Paul give us hope, Ma. Because they are proud of who they are, and they care so much about our culture and history. Emily was the first to write your biography because she knows how crucial it is to get our stories in writing.

Ma, I wish I knew the histories of the women in our family before you. I bet that would be quite a story. But that may be just as well, because I can say that you started something. Maybe you feel ambivalent or doubtful about it, but you did. Actually, you should be proud of what you've begun. I am. If my reaction to being a Yellow Woman is different than yours was, please know that that is not a judgment on you, a criticism or a denial of you, your worth. I have always

supported you, and as the years pass, I think I begin to understand you more and more.

In the last few years, I have realized the value of Homework: I have studied the history of our people in this country. I cannot tell you how proud I am to be a Chinese/Korean American Woman. We have such a proud heritage, such a courageous tradition. I want to tell everyone about that, all the particulars that are left out in the schools. And the full awareness of being a woman makes me want to sing. And I do sing with other Asian Americans and women, Ma, anyone who will sing with me.

I feel now that I can begin to put our lives in a larger framework. Ma, a larger framework! The outlines for us are time and blood, but today there is breadth possible through making connections with others involved in community struggle. In loving ourselves for who we are – American women of color – we can make a vision for the future where we are free to fulfill our human potential. This new framework will not support repression, hatred, exploitation and isolation, but will be a human and beautiful framework, created in a community, bonded not by color, sex or class, but by love and the common goal for the liberation of mind, heart, and spirit.

Ma, today, you are as beautiful and pure to me as the picture I have of you, as a little girl, under my dresser-glass.

I love you,  
Merle

# I Come with No Illusions

## *Mirtha Quintanales*

Querida Chabela (Isabel Yrigoyen),

Columbus, Ohio

December 27, 1979

... Woman love. Never knew it would be so hard to leave anyone. Even though it means everything to me to move on, to finally embark on this self-healing journey. Torn by guilt. My lover. Working-class "white" woman from a small town. She has no more privileges than I do. As alone as I am. She is not my enemy. World upside down.

... What lies ahead? A mystery. Do not dare even consider the possibility of a love relationship with a Latina, a Cuban woman, even to dream that I could find such partnership... family. Work. It is my life. It is all I have. It is what now ultimately propels me to make this move. You, my friends, will sweeten my life. I know that. But I come to you with no illusions. I join you because I must. Give of myself to those who can give to me of themselves. Sisters. Sharing. I look for, expect nothing more. Is there really something more?

Setting myself up? Closing up, putting up barriers? Perhaps. Perhaps just trying to be "my own woman." Perhaps just trying to be one, not one-half. Can I find happiness "alone"? Americans tell me that I should strive for this blessed state of self-contentment as "one" if I intend to survive. Yet often I have doubts. Is this the kind of world I want to live in? A world where ultimately only the "I" matters? Millions of people living in self-constructed little boxes, Incommunicado.

I ponder over the meaning and possible repercussions of the choices I am about to make. What does it mean to say to myself that only other Latina, bicultural lesbian women can satisfy my needs? What are the implications of separating myself from American women and creating a separate community with women I identify as my counterparts?

It means, for one thing, that I am admitting failure. Failure to adjust, adapt, change, transcend cultural differences. Yet this is not only a personal failure. It is one which I share with millions. The reality of ethnic minority enclaves throughout the world tells me a great deal about the process I am going through. It is neither unique nor new. And ultimately it may have a lot more to do with "success" than with failure. It is after all, a survival strategy – particularly in the context of a power imbalance between "natives" and "foreigners" – where the

latter are in a better bargaining position as a *group* than as scattered individuals fighting their own personal battles.

For myself – as a Latina lesbian/feminist, it also means a real narrowing of options and privileges. I have extremely limited resources. No money, no access to power, no legitimacy. If there are many like me I do not know. Nor is it going to be easy for me to connect with them if I should learn that there are. Their resources are likely to be as limited as mine. This is a socio-economic, political reality that acts as a barrier to the formation of a strong and visible community. Not only the "social goodies" (money, power, fame and other minor privileges) but life's necessities (a job, a roof over my head . . .) depend on my ties, my interactions with American men and women. To say "I do not like the nature of this tie with the powerful" is dangerous; for the implications are that I may strive to break free from it and in doing so reduce my chances of making it in this society.

But what of human feeling? It is after all, great personal need, not political analysis that drives me to take this stand, to turn away from my American sisters and put all my energies into creating a community with my Latina sisters. What is the nature and significance of this need? Is it true that love knows no boundaries? Or that being "human" somehow means being ultimately undifferentiated – "all alike"? Perhaps one of the greatest lessons I have learned is that in fact "human nature", bound as it is to "culture", implies variability and difference. Yes, we all need to eat and sleep, keep ourselves warm, protect ourselves from harm, be nurtured into maturity; touch and be touched, etc. But, how we choose to meet these needs varies and changes from time to time, place to place and is dependent both on history and the particular set of environmental circumstances contextual to our lives. What both puzzles me and distresses me is the degree to which we seem to be "culture bound." As if "setting the cultural mold" implied never quite being able to break free from it. At least not completely. This seems to be particularly true in the most private activities of our lives – how we express and share feeling in the context of our intimate inter-personal relationships. The wonder of it! And the pain . . .

Con mucho carino, tu amiga  
Mirtha

# I Paid Very Hard for My Immigrant Ignorance

## *Mirtha Quintanales*

Dear Barbara (Smith),

Columbus, Ohio

January, 1980

Thanks for your letter. I can appreciate your taking the time to write. It can get so difficult for busy people to keep up with correspondence... I only hope that you have taken some time to rest, gather your energies. I'm just beginning to emerge from a several-week period of semi-hermitdom myself. I, too, was exhausted. Too much work too many responsibilities – often the worry of not moving fast enough, or too fast to have any kind of an impact. After a brief peaceful interlude, the pressures are beginning to build again. Oh well...

I wanted to tell you about my visit to San Francisco, about coming together with my Latina lesbian/feminist sisters. The joy and the pain of finding each other, of realizing how long we've "done without", of how difficult it's going to be to heal ourselves, to find our voices... But how perfectly wonderful to finally have a family, a community. Yet I find that there is too much to tell. Cannot easily compress it all in a letter. How I wish that we could meet and talk! So much of the Black lesbian/feminist experience speaks to our own... I passed around all the literature you'd handed out at conferences – including Conditions 5. And the Latina sisters were amazed. Lorraine Bethel's "What Chou Mean We White Girl?" was especially telling... Many of our feelings given form, meaning. Please let her know that her work has been very helpful to us – particularly in sorting out what we want and don't want in our relationships with white, mainstream American feminists. Yes, there is a lot we can learn from each other.

But Barbara, I am worried. At the moment I am in the process of organizing a roundtable for the NWSA\* conference, on the topic of racial and ethnic minority lesbians in the U.S. There are two other women involved – a Greek friend of mine from Berkeley, and a Black woman from San Francisco. And I feel the tension building. The Greek woman's many attempts to "connect" with Third World lesbians and "Women of Color" (most poignantly at last year's conference) have been met with outright rejection. Unfortunately, being loud, aggressive and very Greek-identified, she has found a great deal of

\*National Women's Studies Association

rejection in white, mainstream lesbian/feminist circles as well. Clearly she does not fit there either.

The Black woman's commitments, from what I can gather, are understandably with Third World women, women of color. And I am quite uncomfortably in the middle. As a Third World, Caribbean woman I understand what it means to have grown up "colonized" in a society built on slavery and the oppression of imperialist forces. As an immigrant and a cultural minority woman who happens to be white-skinned, I empathize with the pain of ethnic invisibility and the perils of passing (always a very tenuous situation — since acknowledgement of ethnic ties is inevitably accompanied by stereotyping, prejudice and various kinds of discrimination — the problem is not just personal, but "systemic", "political" — one more reality of American "life.") How to reconcile these different kinds of "primary emergencies": race and culture? Of course this kind of conflict tends to obscure the issue of class and its relationship to race and ethnicity so important for the understanding of the dilemma.

Not all Third World women are "women of color" — if by this concept we mean exclusively "non-white". I am only one example. And not all women of color are really Third World — if this term is only used in reference to underdeveloped or developing societies (especially those not allied with any superpower). Clearly then it would be difficult to justify referring to Japanese women, who are women of color, as Third World women. Yet, if we extend the concept of Third World to include internally "colonized" racial and ethnic minority groups in this country, so many different kinds of groups could be conceivably included, that the crucial issue of social and institutional racism and its historic tie to slavery in the U.S. could get diluted, lost in the shuffle. The same thing would likely happen if we extended the meaning of "women of color" to include all those women in this country who are victims of prejudice and discrimination (in many respects), but who nevertheless hold racial privileges and may even be racists.

I don't know what to think anymore. Things begin to get even more complicated when I begin to consider that many of us who identify as "Third World" or "Women of Color", have grown up as or are fast becoming "middle-class" and highly educated, and therefore more privileged than many of our white, poor and working-class sisters. Sometimes I get angry at my lover because she does not seem to relate to my being a "Cuban" lesbian. And yet, can I really relate to the fact that she grew up in a very small town, in a working-class family — with little money, few other resources, little encouragement to get an education, etc.? Yes... and no. There have been times in my life when my family

had little money or food. There have been times in my life when I lived from day to day not knowing if I would be alive "tomorrow" – not knowing really how it felt to plan for "next month", or "next year."

Yet, even though I grew up having to heat my bathwater and sleep in a very lumpy bed, even though I grew up often being ashamed of bringing my friends home because our furniture was old and dilapidated, I went to private schools, spent summers at the beach, traveled, had plenty of toys and books to read; took music and dancing lessons, went horsebackriding – my parents being very conscious of, and being very *able* to give us the best (if not always in terms of material comforts) that their middle-class resources gave them access to – including the services of a long string of nurse-maids (my mother worked, and in Cuba often the *maids* had maids – even if it meant putting little girls to work as servants and baby-tenders – economic exploitation galore!).

Yes, I have suffered in this country. I have been the victim of blatant prejudice and institutional discrimination. As an ethnic minority woman and a lesbian I have lived in the margins, in fear, isolated, disconnected, silent and in pain. Nevertheless, those early years of relatively "blissful" middle-class childhood (although I have to say that after age 7 it was *hell* – political violence and death always lurking) in my own country where I was simply part of the "mainstream" if not a little better off because of my father's professional status, have served me as a "cushion" throughout my life. Even in the United States, as an essentially middle-class (and white-skinned woman), I have had "opportunities" (or have known how to make them for myself), that my very white, working-class American lover has never had. Having managed to graduate from college (one out of three in her graduating high school class who managed to make it to college) against tremendous odds, she is still struggling with the fact that she may never really learn the ropes of surviving well in mainstream, middle-class American society. And need I add that mainstream white, middle-class American feminism is as insensitive to her needs as it is to mine?

I realize that I cannot fight everybody's battles. But need I create false enemies in order to wage my own? I am a bit concerned when a Latina lesbian sister generalizes about/puts down the "white woman" – especially if she herself has white skin. In the midst of this labeling, might she not dismiss the fact of her own white privileges – regardless of her identification with Black, Native American, and other Third World women of color? Might she not dismiss the fact that she may often be far better off than many white women? I cannot presume to know what it is really like to be a Black woman in America, to be racially oppressed. I cannot presume to know what it is really like to grow up American "White Trash" and destitute.

But I am also a bit concerned when a Black sister generalizes about/dismisses all non-black women, or all women who are not strict "women of color" or strictly "Third World." If you are not WASP in this country, if you or your family have known the immigrant experience or ghetto life, you are likely to be very much acquainted with the social, economic, political reality of internal colonization. Yes, racism is a BIG MONSTER we all need to contend with – regardless of our skin color and ethnic affiliation. But I think we need to keep in mind that in this country, in this world, racism is used *both* to create false differences among us *and* to mask very very significant ones – cultural economic, political... And yes, those who have been racially oppressed must create separatist spaces to explore the meaning of their experiences – to heal themselves, to gather their energies, their strength, to develop their own voices, to build their armies. And yes, those of us who have not been victims of racial oppression must come to terms with our own racism, our own complicity with this system that discriminates and oppresses on the basis of skin color and body features. And of course it would be irresponsible liberal folly to propose that social and institutional racism could be eliminated by simply "becoming" personally non-racist, by becoming "integrated" in our private lives... How ridiculous for white folk to think that a long history of slavery and every other kind of oppression, that an *ongoing* and *insidious* reality of social, economic, political exploitation could be magically transcended through a few individual choices... And even if everybody's skin should suddenly turn black, it would be quite impossible to truly know what it means to have grown up – generation after generation – Black and female in America. Of course our skin is not likely to "turn", and so regardless of how "conscious" we claim to be of the "Black experience" in America, we shall always be limited by our own history and the reality of our white skin and the privileges it automatically confers on us.

Ironically, when a Black American sister (or anyone for that matter) puts me, or other ethnic women of this society in the same category with the socially dominant White American Woman on the basis of lighter-than-black skin color, she is in fact denying my history, my culture, my identity, my very being, my pain and my struggle. She too is being *personally* racist. When she fails to recognize that the "social privileges" of lighter-than-black ethnic-minority lesbians in this society are almost totally dependent on our denial of who we are, on our *ethnic death*, she also falls prey to the racist mythology that color differences are the end-all indications of social inequality. That those who happen to have the "right" skin color are not only all alike but all hold the same social privileges. Yes, lighter-than-black skin color *may*

confer on some ethnic minority women the option of becoming "assimilated", "integrated" in mainstream American society. But is this really a privilege when it always means having to become invisible, ghost-like, identity-less, community-less, totally alienated? The perils of "passing" as white American are perils indeed. It should be easy enough at least for *lesbians* to understand the meaning of being and yet not being, of "merging" and yet remaining utterly alone and in the margins of our society.

And while it is true that a lesbian/feminist community and culture have emerged, while it is true that Black, Latina and other Third World/lesbians "of color" have begun to speak up, it is not true that we have yet engaged in a truly un-biased, un-prejudiced *dialogue*. We are still measuring each other by the yardstick of the White, Capitalist, Imperialist, Racist American Patriarch. We are still seeing radical differences when they don't exist and not seeing them when they are critical. And most disastrously, we are failing to recognize much of what we *share*. Is it not possible for us to recognize, respect and settle our differences; to validate our various groups' struggles and need for separate spaces, and yet to open our eyes to the fact that divided we are only likely to succeed at defeat?

It is pure folly to think that a small group of Latina or Black or Chinese American lesbians can, on its own, create a feminist revolution. It is pure folly to think that middle-class wasp feminists can do so...

Barbara, I ache to live with and love with my Latina lesbian/feminist sisters – to speak "Spanglish", to eat arroz con frijoles, to dance to the salsa, to openly talk sex and flirt with one another; to secretly pray to Yemayá, Chango, Oshun, and the Virgen de Guadalupe. I run to them for refuge, for dear life!

But when I meet you and other Black lesbian sisters – and am moved by what we seem to share, I ache for you also. I spend time with Stacy (Anastasia) and other Southern European/North African/Mediterranean lesbian sisters – and am stirred by what we seem to have in common, I feel deep yearning for them... I read the words of other ethnic American lesbian sisters and I find that I understand them and want to share in these women's lives. And I live, love and work with working-class sisters. Have lived, loved and worked in the poor urban ghettos of Chicago and Boston. Have spent some time in the poor, rural, isolated mountains of New Mexico. Have traveled to Latin American countries, to India, Thailand, Taiwan, Hong-Kong, Japan – feeling the pain of my poor and hard-working sisters – struggling against all odds to stay alive, to live with dignity. I cannot sleep sometimes – haunted by the memories of such all-encompassing poverty – the kind of poverty that even poor Americans could not begin to con-

ceive. India. India was the unraveling. How insignificant our troubles seem in the United States...How ridiculously small my own struggles...I don't feel guilt or shame, but this nausea...To find us squabbling over who may or may not be called a feminist, who may or may not join or take part in this or that particular political group, etc, etc. The privilege of having feminist "groups"—most women in the world just eat shit. And lesbians—who really knows the fate of most lesbians in the world, especially the Third World?

Is it not possible for all of us here in America to turn *right now* to *all* the sisters of the world—to form a common, human-woman-lesbian bond?

I have lost some sleep lately pondering over this race/culture/class problem...We've got to do *something!* Many of us Latinas are non-white—as a matter of fact, most of us are racially mixed to various degrees. Ask a Black or "mulatto" Puerto Rican woman what her identity is though, and most likely she will tell you "Puerto Rican." All Chinese American women are non-white. But ask any of them what her identity is. She will not tell you "yellow", she will tell you Chinese, or Chinese American. Many African peoples are "Black", but ask a Nigerian, an Ethiopian, etc. what her identity is, and she will tell you "Nigerian", or "Ethiopian", or whatever...Obviously "Black Culture" is an American phenomenon. Many of us don't really understand this. I know I didn't for a long time. When I first came to this country I just assumed that Black people were simply American (for that matter I just assumed *all* Americans shared the same "American Culture"). I grew up with people of all kinds of skin-color—but we were all *Cuban* and understood each other, even though we *could* recognize the most minute "color differences," even though we could recognize class differences. How was I supposed to know—given the propaganda—that there was no such thing as a "melting pot"? How was I supposed to know that racism was so widespread and so deeply ingrained in American society? I was *shocked* in my sophomore year in college when several Black women implied that I was a racist when I said I could not figure out what was different about being Black or Yellow, or White, or Red in the United States. I could understand not knowing about a "culture", but not knowing about a "race"? Was "race" per se so important? Was it really linked to a "culture"? This was a weird notion to me indeed!

Well I paid very hard for my immigrant ignorance. I'm still paying—even though I have learned a great deal since then about American sub-cultures and about American racism. Many of my Latina sisters have had similar experiences, and the big question is always there—Will we ever really be accepted by our Black American

sisters? I cannot really convey the pain – especially in those of us who are Afro-Hispanic-American but light skinned – of seeing so much of ourselves in, of being so drawn to African-American women, and yet feeling that we are very likely to be denied a connection, to be rejected. The fucking irony of it! Racism. It has so thoroughly poisoned Americans of all colors that many of us can simply not see beyond it. I'm sorry about this long letter Barbara – especially this last part. But I have not been able to get over this pain. I used to have this recurrent dream (for years) that I would alternately become black and white and black and white over and over and over again... It felt really good. But I've never quite figured out all of what it meant... Well, take care Barbara.

In sisterhood,  
Mirtha

# Earth-Lover, Survivor, Musician

## *Naomi Littlebear*

The following is an excerpt from a letter in response to Cherrie's request that Naomi write an essay on "language & oppression" as a Chicana:

Cherrie,

January, 1980

I have a clear image in my mind about the things we talked about, your anger about language, identification – given the brief acquaintance, I personally could relate to a lot of what you were saying – i realize that those feelings had a lot to do with why i wrote the book i'm sending you\* – that was a very important time in my life. However I realize now that it wasn't for me exactly the most balanced part of my life. It was only a time in which i hurt so bad i had to shake off the dust of one too many insults in order to carry on. Nonetheless, my criticism, analysis, etc. did not come from a natural place in me. It was not the "voice of my mothers" nor did it completely reflect the way i was brought up to be. I wrote that book as a brown woman's retort to white *people*, white middle class leftists who were trying to redirect my spirit. I was *supposed* to be the angry chicana speaking her vengeance against whites, against the capitalist system.

*I am a sad chicana lesbian woman who is woman-identified earth lover, survivor, musician – music and beauty are my tools against my aches and pains – striving to bring peace into an otherwise tumultuous past.*

*I am not the scholar analyst you are – which I totally respect. I'm clear about why i am and how i am – i cannot extricate the lesbian from my soul no more than i could the chicana – i have always been both.*

The woman I am right now is not struggling with language – this time – i am closest and clearest right now about violence – i am haunted by dreams from my childhood and not-too-distant past. I could not adequately write about language unless i was right there with the problem, as you seem to be – you are fairly bursting with reasons and important thoughts, insights into our mutual experience with the degradation and denial that came with our language loss (abduction?).

\**The Dark Side of the Moon*. (Olive Press, Portland Ore.). Book of essays & poetry on life in the barrio, and the topics of the Church, Family, Education & the Left.

Imagine the process you would have to go thru if I asked you to write me a paper on violence in the barrios and how that affected your personal life? *I need to feel control of my own life – violence has on some deep level rendered me helpless and given me a deep fear of being powerless* – our language being stripped from us creates similar fears. I need to figure out what is closest to me. I have done some work in exorcising the demons of communication – my current observation is that i feel comfortable with words again, except when i try to make scientific discoveries – that is me reacting to male energy that says women are stupid & emotional.

My emotions & intuitions are there for a purpose. They are honest perceptions. I don't have to try to be grassroots. I do have to try to relate my straight feminist politics.

Wanting to be loving and have a family is my connection with my culture. I am doing that. Going to meetings is not part of my ethnic background.

I got real turned around when i got involved with leftist politics. I am now trying to piece my life together, discard the violence & humiliations, accept that i am a complete person with nothing lacking. My mind & heart are capable of deciding what's best for me.

For once in my life i have to let my self deserve a home, food on the table, and a handful of loving friends – this is a time of healing and taking the blame of the rapes and attempted rapes, the child beatings i received, taking all that pain off my shoulders and giving it back to who it belongs.

I want you to accept me as i accept you. Be an amiga, not a comrade to me. I will send you more words if you like but right now the hurt's all around me and i feel like flying away. I will fight back with music, but don't ask me to fight with words. Trust my instincts, my knowledge – i am not a sheltered little wetback – i've been through so much pain that i've popped out the other side. We have been thru so much pain that now we have no place to put that pain but to leave it out of our lives – because the pain was given to do its worst damage by festering in our soul, by growing comfortable in our flesh that we more often hurt each other 'tho infested by the same disease.

I have no solution but to go on. I will not carry the stigma that so many have tried to burden me with. These words are mine because this now is *my* language – 13 years of English, 13 years of Spanish – that's when I flipped out – the day of my two "children's" anniversary. I was prompted by devils – clinical radicals who instructed me in self-autopsy. Please applaud my victory over those fuckers – it is *your* victory as well – remember they think we're all related. We're

not at all where they expected us to be—we just slipped through—because we knew damn well it was a lie.

I refuse to be separated from your life by these words. I read you loud & clear: the story-telling, my crazy aunts, the laughter, deep-hearted joy, celebrating *anything* with a six-pack of beer.\*

I remember. And as long as i know you too were once there—it is something that can warm us both this winter.

Because i haven't seen my cousins in years.

That is what i miss, that is what i'm looking for.

March 23, 1980

Now that the ice has melted and the flowers begin to bloom i welcome the season of growing. Thank you for sharing with me. I do believe we have in common—the cultural rip off, the anger, the wisdom, the fullness of life.

... I have started this letter many times, wanting to send you these stories. I appreciated your letter very much. It's still on my desk reminding me how hard we are working to be visible.

We are touring again, maybe we'll meet.

.

\*Here Naomi is referring to experiences Cherríe describes in her essay, "La Güera."





## **Speaking in Tongues**

### **The Third World Woman Writer**



"who told you anybody wants to hear from you, you aint nothing but a black woman." – hattie gossett

"Who am I, a poor Chicanita from the sticks, to think I could write."  
– Gloria Anzaldúa

As first generation writers, we defy the myth that the color of our skins prevents us from using the pen to create. hattie gossett's piece, the introduction to her first book, is presented here in recognition of that act of defiance. But it is not enough to have our books published. We must also actively engage in establishing the criteria and the standards by which our work can be viewed. As Barbara Smith laid the groundwork in developing literary criticism for Black women in "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism,"\* here Norma Alarcón plants the seed which germinates a feminist criticism involving the history, mythology, and writings of La Chicana. This article represents the kind of literary criticism that is beginning to appear in every segment of the Third World women's community.

We are Third World women writers, so similar yet so different, similar in the issues we confront, different in approach and style. What we have in common is our love of writing and a love of the literature of women of color. In our common struggle and in our writing we reclaim our tongues. We wield a pen as a tool, a weapon, a means of survival, a magic wand that will attract power, that will draw self-love into our bodies.

And though often we may feel ambivalent about our devotion to the female self, we continue to swim *fearless with the length of our own bodies* (Wong) in a sea of words. We continue to swim toward that raft and lifeline which is ourself – ourself as mother, ourself as hero. What we choose finally is to *cultivate our colored skins*.

a teacher taught me  
more than she knew  
patting me on the head  
putting words in my hand

\**Conditions 2*. Brooklyn, NY, 1977.

— “pretty little *Indian* girl!”  
saving them —  
going to give them  
back to her one day. . .

*A woman who writes has power. A woman with power is feared.* In the eyes of the world this makes us dangerous beasts.

\*Anna Lee Walters in *The Third Woman—Minority Women Writers in the U.S.*  
Dexter Fisher (ed.) (Houghton Mifflin, 1980) p. 109

# Speaking In Tongues: A Letter To 3rd World Women Writers\*

Gloria Anzaldúa

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Dear mujeres de color, companions in writing –

I sit here naked in the sun, typewriter against my knee trying to visualize you. Black woman huddles over a desk in the fifth floor of some New York tenement. Sitting on a porch in south Texas, a Chicana fanning away mosquitos and the hot air, trying to arouse the smouldering embers of writing. Indian woman walking to school or work lamenting the lack of time to weave writing into your life. Asian American, lesbian, single mother, tugged in all directions by children, lover or ex-husband, and the writing.

It is not easy writing this letter. It began as a poem, a long poem. I tried to turn it into an essay but the result was wooden, cold. I have not yet unlearned the esoteric bullshit and pseudo-intellectualizing that school brainwashed into my writing.

How to begin again. How to approximate the intimacy and immediacy I want. What form? A letter, of course.

My dear *hermanas*, the dangers we face as women writers of color are not the same as those of white women though we have many in common. We don't have as much to lose – we never had any privileges. I wanted to call the dangers "obstacles" but that would be a kind of lying. We can't *transcend* the dangers, can't rise above them. We must go through them and hope we won't have to repeat the performance.

Unlikely to be friends of people in high literary places, the beginning woman of color is invisible both in the white male mainstream world and in the white women's feminist world, though in the latter this is gradually changing. The *lesbian* of color is not only invisible, she doesn't even exist. Our speech, too, is inaudible. We speak in tongues like the outcast and the insane.

Because white eyes do not want to know us, they do not bother to learn our language, the language which reflects us, our culture, our spirit. The schools we attended or didn't attend did not give us the skills for writing nor the confidence that we were correct in using our class and ethnic languages. I, for one, became adept at, and majored in English to spite, to show up, the arrogant racist teachers who thought

\*Originally written for *Words In Our Pockets* (Bootlegger: San Francisco), the Feminist Writers' Guild Handbook.

all Chicano children were dumb and dirty. And Spanish was not taught in grade school. And Spanish was not required in High School. And though now I write my poems in Spanish as well as English I feel the rip-off of my native tongue.

*I lack imagination you say*

*No. I lack language.  
The language to clarify  
my resistance to the literate.  
Words are a war to me.  
They threaten my family.*

*To gain the word  
to describe the loss  
I risk losing everything.  
I may create a monster  
the word's length and body  
swelling up colorful and thrilling  
looming over my *mother*, characterized.  
Her voice in the distance  
*unintelligible illiterate.**

*These are the monster's words.<sup>1</sup>*

Cherrie Moraga

Who gave us permission to perform the act of writing? Why does writing seem so unnatural for me? I'll do anything to postpone it – empty the trash, answer the telephone. The voice recurs in me: *Who am I, a poor Chicanita from the sticks, to think I could write?* How dare I even considered becoming a writer as I stooped over the tomato fields bending, bending under the hot sun, hands broadened and calloused, not fit to hold the quill, numbed into an animal stupor by the heat.

How hard it is for us to *think* we can choose to become writers, much less *feel* and *believe* that we can. What have we to contribute, to give? Our own expectations condition us. Does not our class, our culture as well as the white man tell us writing is not for women such as us?

The white man speaks: *Perhaps if you scrape the dark off of your face. Maybe if you bleach your bones. Stop speaking in tongues, stop writing left-handed. Don't cultivate your colored skins nor tongues of fire if you want to make it in a right-handed world.*

"Man, like all the other animals, fears and is repelled by that which he does not understand, and mere difference is apt to connote something malign."<sup>2</sup>

I think, yes, perhaps if we go to the university. Perhaps if we become male-women or as middleclass as we can. Perhaps if we give up loving women, we will be worthy of having something to say worth saying. They convince us that we must cultivate art for art's sake. Bow down to the sacred bull, form. Put frames and metaframes around the writing. Achieve distance in order to win the coveted title "literary writer" or "professional writer." Above all do not be simple, direct, nor immediate.

Why do they fight us? Because they think we are dangerous beasts? Why *are* we dangerous beasts? Because we shake and often break the white's comfortable stereotypic images they have of us: the Black domestic, the lumbering nanny with twelve babies sucking her tits, the slant-eyed Chinese with her expert hand – "They know how to treat a man in bed," the flat-faced Chicana or Indian, passively lying on her back, being fucked by the Man *a la La Chingada*.

The Third World woman revolts: *We revoke, we erase your white male imprint. When you come knocking on our doors with your rubber stamps to brand our faces with DUMB, HYSTERICAL, PASSIVE PUTA, PERVERT, when you come with your branding irons to burn MY PROPERTY on our buttocks, we will vomit the guilt, self-denial and race-hatred you have force-fed into us right back into your mouth. We are done being cushions for your projected fears. We are tired of being your sacrificial lambs and scapegoats.*

I can write this and yet I realize that many of us women of color who have strung degrees, credentials and published books around our necks like pearls that we hang onto for dear life are in danger of contributing to the invisibility of our sister-writers. "La Vendida," the sell-out.

*The danger of selling out one's own ideologies.* For the Third World woman, who has, at best, one foot in the feminist literary world, the temptation is great to adopt the current feeling-fads and theory fads, the latest half truths in political thought, the half-digested new age psychological axioms that are preached by the white feminist establishment. Its followers are notorious for "adopting" women of color as their "cause" while still expecting us to adapt to *their* expectations and *their* language.

How dare we get out of our colored faces. How dare we reveal the human flesh underneath and bleed red blood like the white folks. It takes tremendous energy and courage not to acquiesce, not to capitulate to a definition of feminism that still renders most of us invisible. Even as I write this I am disturbed that I am the only Third World woman writer in this handbook. Over and over I have found myself

to be the only Third World woman at readings, workshops, and meetings.

*We cannot allow ourselves to be tokenized. We must make our own writing and that of Third World women the first priority.* We cannot educate white women and take them by the hand. Most of us are willing to help but we can't do the white woman's homework for her. That's an energy drain. More times than she cares to remember, Nellie Wong, Asian American feminist writer, has been called by white women wanting a list of Asian American women who can give readings or workshops. We are in danger of being reduced to purveyors of resource lists.

*Coming face to face with one's limitations. There are only so many things I can do in one day.* Luisah Teish addressing a group of predominantly white feminist writers had this to say of Third World women's experience:

"If you are not caught in the maze that (we) are in, it's very difficult to explain to you the hours in the day we do not have. And the hours that we do not have are hours that are translated into survival skills and money. And when one of those hours is taken away it means an hour not that we don't have to lie back and stare at the ceiling or an hour that we don't have to talk to a friend. For me it's a loaf of bread."

Understand.

My family is poor.

Poor. I can't afford  
a new ribbon. The risk  
of this one is enough  
to keep me moving  
through it, accountable.

The repetition like my mother's  
stories retold, *each* time  
reveals more particulars  
gains more familiarity.

You can't get me in your car so fast.<sup>3</sup>

Cherríe Moraga

"Complacency is a far more dangerous attitude than outrage."<sup>4</sup>

Naomi Littlebear

Why am I compelled to write? Because the writing saves me from this complacency I fear. Because I have no choice. Because I must

keep the spirit of my revolt and myself alive. Because the world I create in the writing compensates for what the real world does not give me. By writing I put order in the world, give it a handle so I can grasp it. I write because life does not appease my appetites and hunger. I write to record what others erase when I speak, to rewrite the stories others have miswritten about me, about you. To become more intimate with myself and you. To discover myself, to preserve myself, to make myself, to achieve self-autonomy. To dispell the myths that I am a mad prophet or a poor suffering soul. To convince myself that I am worthy and that what I have to say is not a pile of shit. To show that I *can* and that I *will* write, never mind their admonitions to the contrary. And I will write about the unmentionables, never mind the outraged gasp of the censor and the audience. Finally I write because I'm scared of writing but I'm more scared of not writing.

*Why should I try to justify why I write? Do I need to justify being Chicana, being woman? You might as well ask me to try to justify why I'm alive.*

The act of writing is the act of making soul, alchemy. It is the quest for the self, for the center of the self, which we women of color have come to think as "other"—the dark, the feminine. Didn't we start writing to reconcile this other within us? We knew we were different, set apart, exiled from what is considered "normal," white-right. And as we internalized this exile, we came to see the alien within us and too often, as a result, we split apart from ourselves and each other. Forever after we have been in search of that self, that "other" and each other. And we return, in widening spirals and never to the same childhood place where it happened, first in our families, with our mothers, with our fathers. The writing is a tool for piercing that mystery but it also shields us, gives a margin of distance, helps us survive. And those that don't survive? The waste of ourselves: so much meat thrown at the feet of madness or fate or the state.

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It is dark and damp and has been raining all day. I love days like this. As I lie in bed I am able to delve inward. Perhaps today I will write from that deep core. As I grope for words and a voice to speak of writing, I stare at my brown hand clenching the pen and think of you thousands of miles away clutching your pen. You are not alone.

Pen, I feel right at home in your ink doing a pirouette, stirring the cobwebs, leaving my signature on the window panes. Pen, how could I ever have feared you. You're quite house-broken but it's your wildness I am in love with. I'll have to get rid of you when you start being predictable, when you stop chasing dustdevils. The more you outwit me the more I love you. It's when I'm tired or have had too much caffeine or wine that you get past my defenses and

you say more than what I had intended. You surprise me, shock me into knowing some part of me I'd kept secret even from myself.

— Journal entry.

In the kitchen Maria and Cherrie's voices falling on these pages. I can see Cherrie going about in her terry cloth wrap, barefoot washing the dishes, shaking out the tablecloth, vacuuming. Deriving a certain pleasure watching her perform those simple tasks, I am thinking *they lied, there is no separation between life and writing.*

The danger in writing is not fusing our personal experience and world view with the social reality we live in, with our inner life, our history, our economics, and our vision. What validates us as human beings validates us as writers. What matters to us is the relationships that are important to us whether with our self or others. We must use what is important to us to get to the writing. *No topic is too trivial.* The danger is in being too universal and humanitarian and invoking the eternal to the sacrifice of the particular and the feminine and the specific historical moment.

The problem is to focus, to concentrate. The body distracts, sabotages with a hundred ruses, a cup of coffee, pencils to sharpen. The solution is to anchor the body to a cigarette or some other ritual. And who has time or energy to write after nurturing husband or lover, children, and often an outside job? The problems seem insurmountable and they are, but they cease being insurmountable once we make up our mind that whether married or childrenged or working outside jobs we are going to make time for the writing.

Forget the room of one's own — write in the kitchen, lock yourself up in the bathroom. Write on the bus or the welfare line, on the job or during meals, between sleeping or waking. I write while sitting on the john. No long stretches at the typewriter unless you're wealthy or have a patron — you may not even own a typewriter. While you wash the floor or clothes listen to the words chanting in your body. When you're depressed, angry, hurt, when compassion and love possess you. When you cannot help but write.

*Distractions* all — that I spring on myself when I'm so deep into the writing when I'm almost at that place, that dark cellar where some "thing" is liable to jump up and pounce on me. The ways I subvert the writing are many. The way I don't tap the well nor learn how to make the windmill turn.

Eating is my main distraction. Getting up to eat an apple danish. That I've been off sugar for three years is not a deterrent nor that I have to put on a coat, find the keys and go out into the San Francisco fog to get it. Getting up to light incense, to put a record on, to go for a walk — anything just to put off the writing.

Returning after I've stuffed myself. Writing paragraphs on pieces of paper, adding to the puzzle on the floor, to the confusion on my desk making completion far away and perfection impossible.

26 mayo 80

Dear mujeres de color, I feel heavy and tired and there is a buzz in my head – too many beers last night. But I must finish this letter. My bribe: to take myself out to pizza.

So I cut and paste and line the floor with my bits of paper. My life strewn on the floor in bits and pieces and I try to make some order out of it working against time, psyching myself up with decaffeinated coffee, trying to fill in the gaps.

Leslie, my housemate, comes in, gets on hands and knees to read my fragments on the floor and says, "It's good, Gloria." And I think: *I don't have to go back to Texas, to my family of land, mesquites, cactus, rattlesnakes and roadrunners. My family, this community of writers. How could I have lived and survived so long without it. And I remember the isolation, re-live the pain again.*

"To assess the damage is a dangerous act,"<sup>5</sup> writes Cherríe Moraga. To stop there is even more dangerous.

It's too easy, blaming it all on the white man or white feminists or society or on our parents. What we say and what we do ultimately comes back to us, so let us own our responsibility, place it in our own hands and carry it with dignity and strength. No one's going to do my shitwork, I pick up after myself.

It makes perfect sense to me now how I resisted the act of writing, the commitment to writing. To write is to confront one's demons, look them in the face and live to write about them. Fear acts like a magnet; it draws the demons out of the closet and into the ink in our pens.

The tiger riding our backs (writing) never lets us alone. *Why aren't you riding, writing, writing?* It asks constantly till we begin to feel we're vampires sucking the blood out of too fresh an experience; that we are sucking life's blood to feed the pen. Writing is the most daring thing I have ever done and the most dangerous. Nellie Wong calls writing "the three-eyed demon shrieking the truth."<sup>6</sup>

Writing is dangerous because we are afraid of what the writing reveals: the fears, the angers, the strengths of a woman under a triple or quadruple oppression. Yet in that very act lies our survival because a woman who writes has power. And a woman with power is feared.

What did it mean for a black woman to be an artist in our grandmother's time? It is a question with an answer cruel enough to stop the blood. – Alice Walker.<sup>7</sup>

I have never seen so much power in the ability to move and transform others as from that of the writing of women of color.

In the San Francisco area, where I now live, none can stir the audience with their craft and truthsaying as do Cherrie Moraga (Chicana), Genny Lim (Asian American), and Luisah Teish (Black). With women like these, the loneliness of writing and the sense of powerlessness can be dispelled. We can walk among each other talking of our writing, reading to each other. And more and more when I'm alone, though still in communion with each other, the writing possesses me and propels me to leap into a timeless, spaceless no-place where I forget myself and feel I am the universe. *This is power.*

It's not on paper that you create but in your innards, in the gut and out of living tissue – *organic writing* I call it. A poem works for me *not* when it says what I want it to say and *not* when it evokes what I want it to. It works when the subject I started out with metamorphoses alchemically into a different one, one that has been discovered, or uncovered, by the poem. It works when it surprises me, when it says something I have repressed or pretended not to know. The meaning and worth of my writing is measured by how much *I* put myself on the line and how much nakedness I achieve.

Audre said we need to speak up. Speak loud, speak unsettling things and be dangerous and just fuck, hell, let it out and let everybody hear whether they want to or not.<sup>8</sup>

Kathy Kendall

I say *mujer magica*, empty yourself. Shock yourself into new ways of perceiving the world, shock your readers into the same. Stop the chatter inside their heads.

Your skin must be sensitive enough for the lightest kiss and thick enough to ward off the sneers. If you are going to spit in the eye of the world, make sure your back is to the wind. Write of what most links us with life, the sensation of the body, the images seen by the eye, the expansion of the psyche in tranquility: moments of high intensity, its movement, sounds, thoughts. *Even though we go hungry we are not impoverished of experiences.*

I think many of us have been fooled by the mass media, by society's conditioning that our lives must be lived in great explosions, by "falling in love," by being "swept off our feet," and by the sorcery of magic genies that will fulfill our every wish, our every childhood longing. Wishes, dreams, and fantasies are important parts of our creative lives. They are the steps a writer integrates into her craft. They are the spectrum of resources to reach the truth, the heart of

things, the immediacy and the impact of human conflict.<sup>9</sup>

Nellie Wong

Many have a way with words. They label themselves seers but they will not see. Many have the gift of tongue but nothing to say. Do not listen to them. Many who have words and tongue have no ear, they cannot listen and they will not hear.

There is no need for words to fester in our minds. They germinate in the open mouth of the barefoot child in the midst of restive crowds. They wither in ivory towers and in college classrooms.

Throw away abstraction and the academic learning, the rules, the map and compass. Feel your way without blinders. To touch more people, the personal realities and the social must be evoked – not through rhetoric but through blood and pus and sweat.

*Write with your eyes like painters, with your ears like musicians, with your feet like dancers. You are the truthsayer with quill and torch. Write with your tongues of fire. Don't let the pen banish you from yourself. Don't let the ink coagulate in your pens. Don't let the censor snuff out the spark, nor the gags muffle your voice. Put your shit on the paper.*

We are not reconciled to the oppressors who whet their howl on our grief. We are not reconciled.

Find the muse within you. The voice that lies buried under you, dig it up. Do not fake it, try to sell it for a handclap or your name in print.

Love,  
Gloria

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Cherrie Moraga's poem, "It's the Poverty" from *Loving In The War Years*, an unpublished book of poems.
- <sup>2</sup> Alice Walker, editor, "What White Publishers Won't Print," *I Love Myself When I am Laughing---A Zora Neale Hurston Reader*, (New York: The Feminist Press, 1979), p. 169.
- <sup>3</sup> Moraga, *Ibid.*
- <sup>4</sup> Naomi Littlebear, *The Dark of the Moon*, (Portland. Olive Press, 1977) p. 36.
- <sup>5</sup> Cherrie Moraga's essay, see "La Güera."
- <sup>6</sup> Nellie Wong, "Flows from the Dark of Monsters and Demons: Notes on Writing," *Radical Woman Pamphlet*, (San Francisco, 1979).
- <sup>7</sup> Alice Walker, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: The Creativity of Black Women in the South," *MS*, May, 1974, p. 60.
- <sup>8</sup> Letter from Kathy Kendall, March 10, 1980, concerning a writer's workshop given by Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, and Meridel LeSeur.
- <sup>9</sup> Nellie Wong, *Ibid.*

# who told you anybody wants to hear from you? you aint nothing but a black woman!

*hattie gossett*

first of all let me say that it is really a drag to have to write the introduction to your own book.\*

i mean! after i went through everything i had to go through to write this whole book (and believe me i had to go through a lot) now thats not enough. i have to do more. what more can i do? what more can i say? i have said it all (for the time being anyway) in this book which i hope you are getting ready to read. now the editors are telling me that i have to tell you more. well. sigh. if i have to. sigh, sigh. but i just want you to know from the beginning that i dont like this part of the deal at all. what i really want to be doing now is the rewriting (4 poems) the editing (2 interviews and 1 article) and the other fine tuning things that need to be done so that i can bring this phase of my journey to a close and get onto the next one.

but the main thing i want to be doing now is getting through this nervous breakdown of the crisis of confidence variety. you know when you are almost finished with something you have been working on a long time (the first piece in this book was written in 1966 and i have been editing this book since march 1980 and it is now september 1980) that is real important to you cuz its your first big visible step in a direction you have been trying to go in for a long time and now you are finally about to get there and then suddenly you start doubting yourself and saying things to yourself like who the fuck do you think you are to be writing a book? i mean who do you think you are? and who cares what you think about anything enough to pay money for it during these days of inflation and cutbacks and firings and unemployment and books costing at least \$15 in hardcover and \$5 in paperback? plus theres a national literacy crisis and a major portion of your audience not only cant read but seems to think readin is a waste of time? plus books like this arent sold in the ghetto bookshops or even in airports? on top of that you aint nothing but a black woman! who told you anybody wanted to hear from you? this aint the 60s you know. its the 80s.

\*"my soul looks back in wonder/wild wimmin don't get no blues"© hattie gossett, 1980  
(unpublished).

dont nobody care nothing about black folks these days. we is definitely not in vogue. this season we are not the rage. aint nobody even seriously courting our vote during this presidential election year. and you know what happens when a black woman opens her mouth to say anything other than do it to me! do it to me! do it to me daddy do! dont you? havent you had enough of that? or are you a masochist? or a fool?

see? thats why i would rather be somewhere getting my nervous breakdown over with so i can move on. cuz you know that i know that all this doubting is a trap laid out in the patripower days of long ago to keep me/us from doing what we know got to be done. but it sure would be nice that while i was finishing with the nervous breakdown someone else was writing the introduction. it would be a sensitive loving understanding piece of writing that would tell you what you need to know about me and about the stuff in this book so that you can get the most out of it. but no i cant even do that. i got to sit here and write this introduction myself and tell you that i was born into this life the child of houseniggahs and that i been struggling trying to get home ever since.

september 9, 1980

# In Search of the Self As Hero: Confetti of Voices on New Year's Night A Letter to Myself

*Nellie Wong*

You want to run away and hide now, become a breeze beneath a willow tree, a breath from the dragon's mouth, a blade of grass struggling skyward to shoot above the ground, not to be squashed like an ant, not to be forgotten perhaps like an Asian prostitute. These past few days now, that have become years of memories and dreams, of work and struggle, of becoming and living, you shiver in the fleece of your inkblue robe, wondering why you tiptoe down the stairs to write, to face your typewriter like a long, lost friend, welcoming her this New Year's Night.

You don't question the urgency to write, to express yourselves, your innocence and naivete, your conflicts and passions, your doubts and beliefs, as a woman, a writer, a feminist, a poet, an Asian American, a secretary, a thlee yip nui, a wife, trying to learn the business of life: the act of loving. You have come away from a weekend of workshops at the Modern Language Association conference, absorbed the words and thoughts of writers like yourselves, provoked by the hate and love directed at a book by Maxine Hong Kingston. *The Woman Warrior: A Girlhood Among Ghosts* — for you a book of brilliance, of love and anger, becoming an art form, a testimony and vision of one Chinese American woman's world.

Ah, but you ask, *who determines Chinese American culture, Asian American sensibility?* These opponents to the art of Maxine Hong Kingston, or to the confetti of voices fluttering from the past, voices still yet to be heard, to be written down?

Who are you who has written a book of poems, who has stored away over ten years of fiction, poems and prose? Who are you who describes herself as an Asian American Feminist, who works and writes toward that identity, that affinity, that necessary self-affirming love? And you ask yourselves if you must retreat, scared rabbits, into the forests of your own imagination, your own prisons and clearings, your entanglements of words versus concepts, of dreams versus reality, of expression versus interpretation, of language versus life, knowing in all your sensibilities as a woman writer that you face the struggles head on. You know there is no retreat now, no avoiding the confrontations, the debates and disagreements between what is art and what is

not art which for you also means: what is Asian American feminist art and politics?

If you sing too often of woe, yours or your sisters', you may be charged with being "too personal," "too autobiographical," too much a woman who cries out, who acknowledges openly, shamelessly, the pain of living and the joy of becoming free. You believe, almost too simply, that you are establishing your own traditions, becoming your own role model, becoming your own best friend, your own accessible hero. In so doing you do not deny human relationships, but acknowledge them, want them and fight for them. And you are angered by the arrogance of some articles that would tell you that Virginia Woolf is your spiritual mother, your possible role model, for the work you have to do: to write. And why are you angered except for the fact that she was white and privileged, yet so ill that she walked into the sea.

And now you have discovered Ding Ling, China's most prolific woman writer, a feminist, a communist, a loving, fighting woman, whose stories gleam, bright lights in the dark of China's past. Ding Ling, imprisoned for expressing her anguish, her love and compassion for China's women, for recording the conditions of their lives. Ding Ling, attacked for her feminism, supposedly bourgeois, individualistic, impeding the movement of communism in her native land. Now there is information trickling out that she is writing again, silenced for so many years. Now you want to search for more of her work, jewels you want to hold in your own hands. Now you want to share her work, to discover the links between the women of China and the women of Chinese America, to find the grandmothers you wish to adopt.

In your search you do not deny the writings of Hisaye Yamamoto, or Wakako Yamauchi, Jade Snow Wong or Maxine Hong Kingston, Jessica Hagedorn or Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge. However, you deny these women as role models because your experiences are not theirs. Their experiences are not yours though you assimilate them because the range of human experience tickles your solitariness, your desire to become pluralistic, a free spirit soaring into the north and south poles of everywoman's existence. You respect these writers, your contemporaries, and yet you do not only hear their voices simply because you must carve out your own destiny: a woman hero, an adventurer, a doer, a singer, an actor, fearless with the length of your own body, the depth of your dark seeing eyes, the sounds of your typewriter keys. And you ask: *where have you gone and what have you done?* You don't have the time to count the poems, the stories, the outpourings of grief and joy, but they are there in your file cabinet, they are there in your mind, and they are there flowing through your bloodstream. They are

there as surely as you awaken each morning and shower and shower, happy as a hummingbird, content to let the water fall over your body, splash it and splash it, while you soap your ears and underarms, while you shampoo your hair, while you have a few moments alone to let the thoughts and impulses pour into song, rhythm, poems, life.

Could you have become a recluse, simply an observer of life, content to roam by the sea, thinking and dreaming and stopping to eat only when you had to? Could you have become a hobo, an alcoholic, a sleeping princess, content to live through the deeds and accomplishments of others? And what is this adventure, this hunger, that roars in you now, as a woman, a writer, an Asian American, a feminist? And why? And what is this satisfaction, this self-assuredness, of individuality, of spirit, of aloneness? And finally, what is this thrust toward community, toward interaction with women and men, this arrow toward creativity, toward freedom?

You have the support of friends and sister writers. You have the love of your husband and your siblings, and yet you turn from them, run with this force, this necessity, this light toward art, toward politics and writing. In the doing and expressing, in the organizing, cutting and filing, in the hours you spend in your study on a bright Sunday afternoon, you wonder why it seems simple to remove yourselves from other people. You think you could have become a minister, or a nun, judging and commenting on philosophy, on morality, on the complexities of human life, on the injustice of human beings oppressing other human beings. You have no answers. You have questions and more questions about violence against women, against children, against ethnic minorities, against gays. You only understand that you must try to answer your questions. You think at times you can answer them alone, but that is impossible because you live and work as a social being in this material, physical and economic world.

If you desire freedom, total freedom, you ask, does it mean that you must die? You are unafraid, but you think of the dead, of the dying. Of women like Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, writers who killed themselves, poets you've admired; of two Asian American teenaged sisters who committed suicide because their father opposed their dating Hispanic boys. You think of your cousin who hung himself in Las Vegas, his hearing gone, his son alienated from him. You think of your father who died of cirrhosis of the liver, who brought your mother and three sisters to America. You think of your mother who died of stomach cancer, who desired her own fur coat, her own grandson; and of Bok Gung, a cook, a gentle old man, a pioneer, a grandfather, who died at home in his rented room above Hamburger Joe's in Oakland's Chinatown. And is the question that of mortality and how you desire to

become immortal, and not be a fool, a real human being? You a mortal, you a woman, who does not want to be small in any sense of the word. You a poet, you a feminist, who seeks beauty in and beyond the ordinariness of the everyday world.

You talk of children and yet you have none. You talk of writing and leaving a part of yourselves to daughters and sons, their daughters and sons, so they will discover for themselves the heart and minds of Asian Americans, particularly the women who are struggling in this fight for freedom. You don't understand why you have this vision, of leaving work, signs and clues, knowledge and art, stones, however rough or polished, for people you will never know. You realize you will be gone when the questions of the future arise like wildflowers on the plains of this earth. You want to be a part of a legacy and so you write and write, questioning and exploring, not knowing if what you write will become a part of America's freedom song, not knowing if there is a rainbow.

You believed once in your own passivity, your own powerlessness, your own spiritual malaise. You are now awakening in the beginnings of a new birth. Not born again, but born for the first time, triumphant and resolute, out of experience and struggle, out of a flowing, living memory, out of consciousness and will, facing, confronting, challenging head-on the contradictions of your lives and the lives of people around you. You believe now in the necessity and beauty of struggle: that feminism for you means working for the equality and humanity of women and men, for children, for the love that is possible.

You rub your legs in this cold room. You shiver when you recall your own self-pity when you had no date on New Year's Eve, when you regretted the family gathering because it reminded you that you stood out, a woman without a man, a woman without children. Now you are strengthened, encouraged by the range of your own experiences as a writer, a feminist, an organizer, a secretary. Now you are fired by your own needs, by the needs of your sisters and brothers in the social world, by your journey toward solidarity, against tyranny in the workplace, on the streets, in our literature and in our homes. You are fueled by the clarity of your own sight, heated by your own energy to assert yourselves as a human being, a writer, a woman, an Asian American, a feminist, a clerical worker, a student, a teacher, not in loneliness and isolation, but in a community of freedom fighters. Your poems and stories will do some of the work for you, but poems and stories alone aren't enough. Nothing for you is ever enough and so you challenge yourselves, again and again, to try something new, to help build a movement, to organize for the rights of working people, to write a novel, a play, to create a living theater that will embody your dreams and vision, energy in print, on stage, at work that will assert the will of

an independent, freedom-loving woman, that will reflect a sensibility of Asian America, of feminism, of sharing food and wealth with all the people, with all your kin.

And you will not stop working and writing because you care, because you refuse to give up, because you won't submit to the forces that will silence you, a cheong hay poa, a long steam woman, a talker, a dancer who moves with lightning. And you are propelled by your sense of fair play, by your respect for the dead and the living, by your thlee yip American laughter and language, by your desire to help order the chaotic world that you live in, knowing as the stars sparkle on this New Year's night that you will not survive the work that still needs to be done in the streets of Gold Mountain.

# Chicana's Feminist Literature: A Re-Vision Through Malintzin/ or Malintzin: Putting Flesh Back on the Object

*Norma Alarcón*

Malintzin (or La Malinche) was an Aztec noble woman who was presented to Cortes upon landing in Veracruz in 1519. She subsequently served Cortes as lover, translator and tactical advisor. She is a controversial figure in the Conquest of Mexico. Her name is often called forth to reenact, symbolically, the Conquest or any conquest. Part of this drama, analogically so, is now being played out also in Aztlan.

Malintzin's history, her legend and subsequent mythic dimensions as evil goddess and creator of a new race – the mestizo race, embroils her in a family quarrel, where many male members often prefer to see her as the mother-whore, bearer of illegitimate children, responsible for the foreign Spanish invasion; and where female members attempt to restore balance in ways that are sometimes painfully ambivalent, and at other times attempt to topple the traditional patriarchal mythology through revision and re-vision.\*

This essay will explore the traditional image of Malintzin in Chicano culture and will provide examples of the ways contemporary Chicana feminist writers have reacted to and used this image in their work.

In our patriarchal mythological pantheon, there exists even now a woman who was once real. Her historicity, her experience, her true flesh and blood were discarded. A Kantian, dualistic male consciousness stole her and placed her on the throne of evil, like Dante's upside down frozen Judas, doomed to moan and bemoan. The woman is interchangeably called by three names: Malintzin, Malinche, Marina. Malintzin's excruciating life in bondage was of no account, and continues to be of no account. Her almost half century of mythic existence, until recent times mostly in the oral traditions, had turned her into a handy reference point not only for controlling, interpreting or visualizing women, but also to wage a domestic battle of stifling proportions.<sup>1</sup>

Unlike Eve whose primeval reality is not historically documentable and who supposedly existed in some past edenic time, Malintzin's betrayal of our supposed pre-Columbian paradise is recent and hence almost palpable. This almost-within-reach past heightens romantic nostalgia and as a consequence hatred for Malintzin and

\*This introduction to Malintzen is part of an unpublished paper by Norma Alarcón, entitled, "La Malinche: From Tenochtitlan to Aztlan."

women becomes as vitriolic as the American Puritans' loathing of witches-women.

The focus of the betrayal is not a lofty challenge to a "god" who subsequently unleashed evil upon the world as punishment. Disobedience to a "god" might place the discussion at times on an ideal plane and relieve tension momentarily as one switches from an intense dialogue about one's body to a "rarified" field at least in terms of the vocabulary used. However, the male myth of Malintzin is made to see betrayal first of all in her very sexuality, which makes it nearly impossible at any given moment to go beyond the vagina as the supreme site of evil until proven innocent by way of virginity or virtue, the most pawnable commodities around.<sup>2</sup>

Because the myth of Malintzin pervades not only male thought but ours too as it seeps into our own consciousness in the cradle through their eyes as well as our mothers', who are entrusted with the transmission of culture, we may come to believe that indeed our very sexuality condemns us to enslavement. An enslavement which is subsequently manifested in self-hatred. All we see is hatred of women. We must hate her too since love seems only possible through extreme virtue whose definition is at best slippery.

The poet Alma Villanueva must have realized, understood the insidiousness of the hate syndrome. Her whole book *Bloodroots* is a song to the rejection of self-loathing. The poem "I sing to myself" states:

I could weep and rage  
against the man who never  
stroked my fine child hair  
who never felt the pride of  
my femininity...<sup>3</sup>

It is not just the father that is a source of pain; a mother figure appears also. The mother is impotent to help the daughter. All of her energies seem directed, spent in her desire and need for man, a factor that repulses and attracts the daughter. Love for mother is an ambivalence rooted in the daughter's sense of abandonment by her mother and her apparently enormous and irrational need:

Never finding a breast to rest  
and warm myself...<sup>4</sup>

As the daughter proceeds to repeat her mother's experience, she ironically discovers and affirms a "mounting self/love" as a combative force against the repetition of the mother's abnegation, and irrational need of and dependency on men. Self-love as a tool of survival, how-

ever, leads the male lover to reject her. Her conclusion leaves no doubt as to what woman may be forced to do:

I/woman give birth:  
and this time to  
myself<sup>5</sup>

The sexual abuse experienced leaves the daughter no choice but to be her own mother, to provide her own supportive, nurturing base for physical and psychic survival. To escape the cycle of loathing and self-loathing, Villanueva's woman has no alternative, even though she would have wanted more options, but to first love the self and then proceed to regenerate and nurture it by becoming her own mother. She is forced to transform the self into both mother and daughter and rejects the male flesh which at this point in time "is putrid and bitter." He must be transfigured.

The end effect could be seen as narcissistic, a perennial accusation directed at woman's literature. Yet, if it be narcissistic, never has a motive force for it been revealed so tellingly and clearly, never have the possible roots been exposed so well: starvation for self-reflection in the other: man or woman.

The male myth of Malintzin, in its ambivalent distaste and fear of the so-called "enigmatic feminine," echoes in this poem as it does in many Mexican/Chicana's poems, even when her name is not mentioned. The pervasiveness of the myth is unfathomable, often permeating and suffusing our very being without conscious awareness.

The myth contains the following sexual possibilities: woman is sexually passive, and hence at all times open to potential use by men whether it be seduction or rape. The possible use is double-edged: That is, the use of her as pawn may be intracultural – "amongst us guys," or intercultural, which means if we are not using her then "they" must be using her. Since woman is seen as highly pawnable, nothing she does is perceived as a choice. Because Malintzin aided Cortes in the Conquest of the New World, she is seen as concretizing woman's sexual weakness and interchangeability, always open to sexual exploitation. Indeed, as long as we continue to be seen in that way we are earmarked to be abusable matter, not just by men of another culture, but all cultures including the one that breeds us.

Lorna Dee Cervantes addresses herself to the latter point in her poem "Baby you cramp my style." In the poem Malintzin is mentioned by her other name: Malinche. The poet is asked to bestow her sexual favors; the lover's tone implies that her body/self is as available as the mythic Malinche is thought to be by male consciousness:

You cramp my style, baby  
when you roll on top of me  
shouting, "Viva La Raza"  
at the top of your prick.

...  
Come on Malinche  
Gimme some more!<sup>16</sup>

He cramps her style; she refuses sexual exploitation for herself and her daughters yet to come, in a way Malintzin could not do because of the constraints of the slave society into which she was born.

The Mexican poet Rosario Castellanos reminds us in "Malinche"<sup>17</sup> that Malintzin was sold into slavery by complicitous parents to enhance her brother's inheritance. The mother eager to please her new husband agrees to sell her daughter, and therefore enchains her destiny. Castellanos speculates, in the poem, that this is the result of the mother's own self-loathing. A mother who cannot bear to see herself reflected in her daughter's mirror/sexuality, prefers to shatter the image/mirror, negate the daughter and thereby perpetuate rejection and negation.

Bernal Diaz del Castillo, a brilliant chronicler of the Conquest with a great eye for detail, reveals to us that when Malintzin re-encounters her mother and brother years later and during the very process of the Conquest, she is merely polite. It seems that Malintzin, instead of offering them protection within the folds of the victorious, leaves them to their own devices for survival in an embattled country. In a way she condemns them to servitude just as she had been condemned. Why is there no forgiveness? Within what context can we analyze Malintzin's behavior at this point? We have a reversal, the daughter negates the mother.

Within the complex mother-daughter relationship, the mother keeps bearing quite a bit of the responsibility for the daughter's emotional starvation, abandonment or enslavement and yet paradoxically both are subordinate and subjected to a male culture and tradition. Perhaps our sexual identification with our mothers leads us to expect greater understanding from her as well as psychic/sexual protection. Villanueva tells us it is a false expectation – mothers are powerless, looking to satisfy their own hunger through men, which is agonizing for the daughter: "her pain haunted me for years."<sup>18</sup>

Simone Weil suggests that the conscious slave is much superior, and I would add that a woman who is conscious of being perceived as pawn is much superior. I doubt that the historical Malintzin was a truly conscious slave. In her ambiance slavery was a cultural norm, it

was not unusual for men or women to be royalty one day and slave, vanquished or sacrificial victim the next. It was a norm within which she had to seek accommodation. It is also quite possible that what is seen as Malintzin's allegiance to Cortes – hence purposeful betrayal of "her people" – may be explained by Weil's perception of the slave-master relationship. She says, ". . . the thought of being in absolute subjection as somebody's plaything is a thought no human being can sustain: so if a man (I add woman) is left with no means at all of escaping constraint he (she) has no alternative except to persuade himself (herself) that he (she) is doing voluntarily the very things he (she) is forced to do; in other words, he (she) substitutes *devotion* for *obedience* . . . devotion of this kind rests upon self-deception, because the reasons for it will not bear inspection."<sup>9</sup>

In our religiously permeated and oriented indo-hispanic minds, it is often the case that devotion is equated with obedience and vice versa, particularly for women and children, so that disobedience is seen as a lack of devout allegiance, and not necessarily as a radical questioning of our forms of life. This factor makes it almost impossible to sense a shift from obedience to devotion; they have been one and the same for hundreds of years. As such, we are a greater unconscious prey to subjugation which we then proceed to call devotion/love. To be obedient/devoted is proof of love, especially for women and children.

Consciously and unconsciously the Mexican/Chicano patriarchal perspective assigns the role of servitude to woman particularly as heterosexual relationships are conceived today and in the past. In an "Open Letter to Carolina . . . or Relations between Men and Women" the Chicano poet Abelardo Delgado testifies as follows: "Octavio Paz in *El Laberinto de la Soledad* has much to say as to how we as Chicanos see our women. . . For now let it suffice to say that as far as our wives and mothers we make saints of them but remain always in search of a lover with macho characteristics (sic)." Obviously when the wife or would-be-wife, the mother or would-be-mother questions out loud and in print the complex "servitude/devotion/love," she will be quickly seen as false to her "obligation" and duty, hence a traitor. Delgado also points to the creation of a different category of women – macho-lover – who will provide comforts beyond those that fall within the purview of wives and mothers. What is a macho/lover kind of woman?

Delgado goes on to tell Carolina that "All it takes is a simple refusal on the part of women to be abused by us men." However, he cautions about the manner in which it is done, "You must show them all that your mind is on par or above theirs. You must be careful that you do this with some grace, dignity and humility. . . Men might accept your challenges a few times and let it go but if our ego happens to be

wounded, then watch out, Carolina, because what follows is a cold rejection and a new assigned role as a feme-macho."<sup>11</sup> (Will this new role of a "feme-macho" then provide the macho/lovers that are sought above and beyond the wife and mother?)

It seems that what is wanted here is for all women to be a kind of Sor Juana,<sup>12</sup> which leaves out the majority of us who are not fortunate enough to be a women of genius. But because we know Sor Juana's dreadful fate as a result of her intellectual endeavors, we also know that genius is hardly enough. Even genius needs a political base, a constituency. Since many Mexican/Chicana poets' challenges are straightforward, not humble, I shudder to think at our marginalization; how are we being shunned?

When our subjection is manifested through devotion we are saints and escape direct insult. When we are disobedient, hence undevout, we are equated with Malintzin; that is, the *myth* of male consciousness, not the *historical* figure in all her dimensions doomed to live in chains (regardless of which patriarchy might have seemed the best option for survival).

Carmen Tofolla's poem "La Malinche"<sup>13</sup> makes it quite clear that Malintzin as woman is dispossessed of herself by every male ideology with which she was connected. Tofolla would simply like to see Malintzin recognized as a visionary and founder of a people. Yet as I have noted, the realities that this figure encompasses are much too complex to simply replace them with the notion of a matriarch. However, each implicit or explicit poem on Malintzin emphasizes the pervasive pre-occupation and influence of the myth and women's need to demythify.

The mythic aspects of disavowal, and the historical ambiance of Malintzin merge in Chicana's literature to bring out the following sexual political themes: 1) to choose among extant patriarchies is not a choice at all; 2) woman's abandonment and orphanhood and psychic/emotional starvation occur even in the midst of tangible family; 3) woman is a slave, emotionally as well as economically; 4) women are seen not just by one patriarchy but by all as rapeable and sexually exploitable; 5) blind devotion is not a feasible human choice (this is further clarified by the telling absence of poems by women to the Virgin of Guadalupe, while poems by men to her are plentiful); 6) when there is love/devotion it is at best deeply ambivalent as exemplified by Rina Rocha in "To the penetrator."

I hate the love  
I feel for you.<sup>14</sup>

Feminist women agree with Hegel, despite his relentless use of man as universal, that the subject depends on external reality. If she is to be

fully at home this external reality must reflect back to her what she actually is or would want to be. When we don't participate in creating our own defined identity and reality as women, when the material and spiritual realities do not reflect us as contributors to the shaping of the world, we may feel as in Judy Lucero's poem "I speak in an illusion:"

I speak but only in an illusion

For I see and I don't

It's me and It's not

I hear and I don't

These illusions belong to me

I stole them from another

Care to spend a day in my House of Death?

Look at my garden... are U amazed?

No trees, no flowers, no grass... no gardens...

I love and I don't

I hate and I don't

I sing and I don't

I live and I don't

For I'm in a room of clouded smoke

and a perfumed odor

Nowhere can I go and break these bonds

Which have me in an illusion

But the bonds are real.<sup>15</sup>

Feminism is a way of saying that nothing in patriarchy truly reflects women unless we accept distortions – mythic and historical. However, as Chicanas embrace feminism they are charged with betrayal *a la* Malinche. Often great pains are taken to explain that our feminism assumes a humanistic nuance. The charge remains as a clear image imprinted on Chicanas (and I believe most Third World women, in this country or outside of it) by men. It continues to urge us to make quantum leaps towards a male ideologized humanism devoid of female consciousness. The lure of an ideal humanism is seductive, especially for spiritual women such as we have often been brought up to be; but without female consciousness and envisioning how as women we would like to exist in the material world, to leap into humanism without repossessing ourselves may be exchanging one male ideology for another.

As women we are and continue to be tokens everywhere at the present moment. Everywhere in a Third World context, women invited to

partake in the feast of modeling humanism can be counted among the few, and those few may be enjoying what Adrienne Rich calls "a false power which masculine society offers to a few women who 'think like men' on condition that they use it to maintain things as they are. This is the meaning of female tokenism: that power withheld from the vast majority of women is offered to the few."<sup>16</sup>

Even as we concern ourselves with Third World women's economic exploitation, we have to concern ourselves with psychosexual exploitation and pawnability at the hands of one's brother, father, employer, master, political systems and sometimes, sadly so, powerless mothers. As world politics continues the histrionics of dominance and control attempting to figure out just who indeed will be the better macho in the world map, macho politics' last priority is the quality of our lives as women or the lives of our children.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Insofar as feminine symbolic figures are concerned, much of the Mexican/Chicano oral tradition as well as the intellectual are dominated by La Malinche/Llorona and the Virgin of Guadalupe. The former is a subversive feminine symbol which often is identified with La Llorona, the latter a feminine symbol of transcendence and salvation. The Mexican/Chicano cultural tradition has tended to polarize the lives of women through these national (and nationalistic) symbols thereby exercising almost sole authority over the control, interpretation and visualization of women. Although the material on both figures is vast, the following serve as guides to past and present visions and elucidations: Eric Wolf, "The Virgin of Guadalupe: A Mexican National Symbol," *Journal of American Folklore*, 71 (1958), pp. 34-39; Américo Paredes, "Mexican Legendry and the Rise of the Mestizo: A Survey," in *American Folk Legend* edited by Wayland D. Hand, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971, pp. 97-107; Richard M. Dorson's foreword to *Folktales of Mexico*, edited by Américo Paredes, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970, esp. pp. xvi-xxxvii; and Octavio Paz, "The Songs of La Malinche," in *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, translated by Lysander Kemp, New York: Grove Press,

1961, pp. 65-88. Paz takes the traditional male perspective of woman as enigma and mystery and then proceeds to disclose the culture's (men's) mentality *vis-à-vis* these figures. Women in their assigned roles as transmitters of the culture have often adhered to these views, however, they have not created them.

<sup>2</sup> Bertrand Russell in *Marriage and Morals* affirms that the conception of female virtues has been built up in order to make the patriarchal family as we have known it possible.

<sup>3</sup> Villanueva, Alma. "I sing to myself," in *Third Chicano Literary Prize: Irvine 1976-1977*. Dept. of Spanish and Portugese, University of California, Irvine, 1977. pp. 99-101.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101

<sup>6</sup> *El Fuego de Aztlan*, 1, no. 4 (Summer 1977), p. 39

<sup>7</sup> *Poesía no eres tú*. México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1972. pp. 295-297.

<sup>8</sup> Villanueva, *op. cit.*, p. 99

<sup>9</sup> Weil, Simone. *First and Last Notebooks*. Translated by Richard Rees. London: Oxford University Press, 1970. p. 41

<sup>10</sup> See note 1 for my commentary on this text.

<sup>11</sup> *Revista Chicano-Reqeña*, VI, no. 2 (primavera 1978). p. 35, 38.

<sup>12</sup> Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz is a famous poet-nun of the Mexican Colonial Period. A highly creative and intellectual woman, she was forced by the church to abandon her writing after penning a treatise that challenged a prelate's notions on the nature of Love and Christ.

<sup>13</sup> *Canto al Pueblo: An Anthology of Experiences*. San Antonio, Texas: Penca Books, 1978. pp. 38-39.

<sup>14</sup> *Revista Chicano-Riqueña*. III, no. 2 (Primavera 1975) p. 5.

<sup>15</sup> *De Colores*, I, no. 1 (Winter 1973), p. 52

<sup>16</sup> "On Privilege, Power and Tokenism." *MS.* September 1979. p. 43

# Ceremony for Completing a Poetry Reading

## *Chrystos*

This is a give-away poem  
You have come gathering  
You have made a circle with me  
of the places where I have wandered  
I want to give you the first daffodil opening from the earth I have sown  
to give you warm loaves of bread  
baked in soft mounds like breasts  
In this circle I pass each of you a shell from our mother sea  
Hold it in your spirit & hear the stories she will tell you  
I have wrapped your faces around me, a warm robe  
Let me give you ribbonwork leggings, dresses sewn with elk teeth  
moccasins woven with red & sky blue porcupine quills  
I give you blankets woven of flowers & roots  
Come closer  
I have more to give this basket is very large  
I have stitched it of your kind words  
Here is a necklace of feathers & bones  
a sacred meal of choke cherries  
Take this mask of bark which keeps out the evil ones  
This basket is only the beginning  
There is something in my arms for all of you  
I offer you  
this memory of sunrise seen through ice crystals  
Here, an afternoon of looking into the sea from high rocks  
Here, a red-tailed hawk circling over our heads  
One of its feathers drops for your hair  
May I give you this round stone which holds an ancient spirit  
This stone will soothe you  
Within this basket is something you have been looking for  
all of your life  
Come take it  
Take as much as you want  
I give you seeds of a new way  
I give you the moon shining on a fire of singing women  
I give you the sound of our feet dancing  
I give you the sound of our thoughts flying

I give you the sound of peace  
moving into our faces & sitting down  
Come  
this is a give away poem  
I cannot go home  
until you have taken everything  
and the basket which held it  
  
When my hands are empty  
I will be full



**El Mundo Zurdo**

**The Vision**



"Coming into spirituality the way I did changed the christian myth that there is nothing we can do – we are totally powerless. I found out that when there was trouble, my people did not say 'o.k., we can't fight, we just have to let god handle it.' They went and made sacrifices, they evoked their gods and goddesses, they became possessed, and they went out there and they fought. You learn to take power when there is a presence behind you." – Luisah Teish

We, the women here, take a trip back into the self, travel to the deep core of our roots to discover and reclaim our colored souls, our rituals, our religion. We reach a spirituality that has been hidden in the hearts of oppressed people under layers of centuries of traditional god-worship. It emerges from under the veils of La Virgen de Guadalupe and unrolls from Yemaya's ocean waves whenever we need to be uplifted from or need the courage to face the tribulations of a racist patriarchal world where there is no relief. Our spirituality does not come from outside ourselves. It emerges when we listen to the "small still voice" (Teish) within us which can empower us to create actual change in the world.

The vision of our spirituality provides us with no trap door solution, no escape hatch tempting us to "transcend" our struggle. We must act in the everyday world. Words are not enough. We must perform visible and public acts that may make us more vulnerable to the very oppressions we are fighting against. But, our vulnerability *can* be the source of our power – **if we use it.**

As Third World women, we are especially vulnerable to the many-headed demon of oppression. We are the women on the bottom. Few oppressions pass over us. To work towards the freedom of our own skin and souls would, as Combahee states, "...mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of *all* systems of oppression." The love we have for our common maligned bodies and souls must burgeon out in *lucha*, in struggle. As Teish points out, we must work toward diminishing the possibility of being locked up in a padded cell, of being battered or raped. Our feelings of craziness and powerlessness that Combahee speaks of are induced by the shit society dumps on us rather than stemming from being born ugly or evil as the patriarchal shrinks

would have us believe. We must not believe the story *they* tell about us. We must recognize the effects that our external circumstances of sex, class, race and sexuality have on our perception of ourselves – even in our most private unspoken moments.

The vision of radical Third World Feminism necessitates our willingness to work with those people who would feel at home in *El Mundo Zurdo, the left-handed world*: the colored, the queer, the poor, the female, the physically challenged. From our blood and spirit connections with these groups, we women on the bottom throughout the world can form an international feminism. For separatism by race, nation, or gender will not do the trick of revolution. *Autonomy*, however, is *not* separatism. We recognize the right and necessity of colonized peoples throughout the world, including Third World women in the U.S., forming independent movements toward self-government. But ultimately, we must struggle together. *Together* we form a vision which spans from the self-love of our colored skins, to the respect of our foremothers who kept the embers of revolution burning, to our reverence for the trees – the final reminder of our rightful place on this planet.

The change evoked on these pages is material as well as psychic. Change requires a lot of heat. It requires both the alchemist and the welder, the magician and the laborer, the witch and the warrior, the myth-smasher and the myth-maker.

Hand in Hand, we brew and forge a revolution.

# Give Me Back

## *Chrystos*

that anger bone mal mama  
that rattle painted red, painted fresh blood, slaughtered enemy  
hung with strong feathers, guts of vipers  
I'll knock down this old long house this weary war horse  
these dry rituals called  
how are you  
I want that brown thigh bone  
carved with eagle beak  
that club dig it out of the dirt  
mal mama spirit stole my bones put them in her burying jug  
sealed me up in wax & ashes  
I crack out  
arrange my bones in their naming places  
I take what I want  
shaking my sacred hair dancing out taboo  
I mark out the space I am  
with knives

## La Prieta

### Gloria Anzaldúa

When I was born, Mamágrande Locha inspected my buttocks looking for the dark blotch, the sign of *indio*, or worse, of *mulatto* blood. My grandmother (Spanish, part German, the hint of royalty lying just beneath the surface of her fair skin, blue eyes and the coils of her once blond hair) would brag that her family was one of the first to settle in the range country of south Texas.

Too bad *mihijita* was *morena*, *muy prieta*, so dark and different from her own fair-skinned children. But she loved *mihijita* anyway. What I lacked in whiteness, I had in smartness. But it was too bad I was dark like an Indian.

"Don't go out in the sun," my mother would tell me when I wanted to play outside. "If you get any darker, they'll mistake you for an Indian. And don't get dirt on your clothes. You don't want people to say you're a dirty Mexican." It never dawned on her that, though sixth-generation American, we were still Mexican and that all Mexicans are part Indian. I passed my adolescence combatting her incessant orders to bathe my body, scrub the floors and cupboards, clean the windows and the walls.

And as we'd get into the back of the "patron's" truck that would take us to the fields, she'd ask, "Where's your *gorra* (sunbonnet)?" *La gorra* – rim held firm by slats of cardboard, neck flounce flowing over my shoulders – made me feel like a horse with blinders, a member of the French Foreign Legion, or a nun bowed down by her wimple.

One day in the middle of the cotton field, I threw the *gorra* away and donned a *sombrero*. Though it didn't keep out the Texas 110° sun as well as the bonnet, I could now see in all directions, feel the breeze, dry the sweat on my neck.

When I began writing this essay, nearly two years ago, the wind I was accustomed to suddenly turned into a hurricane. It opened the door to the old images that haunt me, the old ghosts and all the old wounds. Each image a sword that cuts through me, each word a test. Terrified, I shelved the rough draft of this essay for a year.

I was terrified because in this writing I must be hard on people of color who are the oppressed victims. I am still afraid because I will have to call us on a lot of shit like our own racism, our fear of women and sexuality. One of my biggest fears is that of betraying myself, of consuming myself with self-castigation, of not being able to unseat the guilt that has ridden on my back for years.

These my two hands  
quick to slap my face  
before others could slap it\*

But above all, I am terrified of making my mother the villain in my life rather than showing how she has been a victim. Will I be betraying her in this essay for her early disloyalty to me?

With terror as my companion, I dip into my life and begin work on myself. Where did it begin, the pain, the images that haunt me?

### Images That Haunt Me

When I was three months old tiny pink spots began appearing on my diaper. "She's a throwback to the Eskimo," the doctor told my mother. "Eskimo girl children get their periods early." At seven I had budding breasts. My mother would wrap them in tight cotton girdles so the kids at school would not think them strange beside their own flat brown mole nipples. My mother would pin onto my panties a folded piece of rag. "Keep your legs shut, Prieta." This, the deep dark secret between us, her punishment for having fucked before the wedding ceremony, my punishment for being born. And when she got mad at me she would yell, "He vatallado mas contigo que con todos los demás y no lo agradece!" (I've taken more care with you than I have with all the others and you're not even grateful.) My sister started suspecting our secret – that there was something "wrong" with me. How much can you hide from a sister you've slept with in the same bed since infancy?

What my mother wanted in return for having birthed me and for nurturing me was that I submit to her without rebellion. Was this a survival skill she was trying to teach me? She objected not so much to my disobedience but to my questioning her right to demand obedience from me. Mixed with this power struggle was her guilt at having borne a child who was marked "con la señá," thinking she had made me a victim of her sin. In her eyes and in the eyes of others I saw myself reflected as "strange," "abnormal," "QUEER." I saw no other reflection. Helpless to change that image, I retreated into books and solitude and kept away from others.

The whole time growing up I felt that I was not of this earth. An alien from another planet – I'd been dropped on my mother's lap. But for what purpose?

One day when I was about seven or eight, my father dropped on my lap a 25¢ pocket western, the only type of book he could pick up at a

\*From my poem, "The Woman Who Lived Forever." All subsequent unacknowledged poems will be from my own writings.

drugstore. The act of reading forever changed me. In the westerns I read, the house servants, the villains and the cantineras (prostitutes) were all Mexicans. But I knew that the first cowboys (vaqueros) were Mexicans, that in Texas we outnumbered the Anglos, that my grandmother's ranch lands had been ripped off by the greedy Anglo. Yet in the pages of these books, the Mexican and Indian were vermin. The racism I would later recognize in my school teachers and never be able to ignore again I found in that first western I read.

My father dying, his aorta bursting while he was driving, the truck turning over, his body thrown out, the truck falling on his face. Blood on the pavement. His death occurred just as I entered puberty. It irrevocably shattered the myth that there existed a male figure to look after me. How could my strong, good, beautiful god-like father be killed? How stupid and careless of god. What if chance and circumstance and accident ruled? I lost my father, god, and my innocence all in one bloody blow.

Every 24 days, raging fevers cooked my brain. Full flowing periods accompanied cramps, tonsillitis and 105° fevers. Every month a trip to the doctors. "It's all in your head," they would say. "When you get older and get married and have children the pain will stop." A monotonous litany from the men in white all through my teens.

The bloodshed on the highway had robbed my adolescence from me like the blood on my diaper had robbed childhood from me. And into my hands unknowingly I took the transformation of my own being.

Nobody's going to save you.  
 No one's going to cut you down  
 cut the thorns around you.  
 No one's going to storm  
 the castle walls nor  
 kiss awake your birth,  
 climb down your hair,  
 nor mount you  
 onto the white steed.

There is no one who  
 will feed the yearning.  
 Face it. You will have  
 to do, do it yourself.\*

My father dead, my mother and I turned to each other. Hadn't we grown together? We were like sisters – she was 16 when she gave birth to me.

\* From "Letting Go."

Though she loved me she would only show it covertly – in the tone of her voice, in a look. Not so with my brothers – there it was visible for all the world to see. They were male and surrogate husbands, legitimate receivers of her power. Her allegiance was and is to her male children, not to the female.

Seeing my mother turn to my brothers for protection, for guidance – a mock act. She and I both knew she wouldn't be getting any from them. Like most men they didn't have it to give, instead needed to get it from women. I resented the fact that it was OK for my brothers to touch and kiss and flirt with her, but not for my sister and me. Resenting the fact that physical intimacy between women was taboo, dirty.

Yet she could not discount me. "Machona – india ladina" (masculine – wild Indian), she would call me because I did not act like a nice little Chicanita is supposed to act: later, in the same breath she would praise and blame me, often for the same thing – being a tomboy and wearing boots, being unafraid of snakes or knives, showing my contempt for women's roles, leaving home to go to college, not settling down and getting married, being a *politica*, siding with the Farmworkers. Yet, while she would try to correct my more aggressive moods, my mother was secretly proud of my "waywardness." (Something she will never admit.) Proud that I'd worked myself through school. Secretly proud of my paintings, of my writing, though all the while complaining because I made no money out of it.

### **Verguenza (Shame)**

... being afraid that my friends would see my momma, would know that she was loud – her voice penetrated every corner. Always when we came into a room everyone looked up. I didn't want my friends to hear her brag about her children. I was afraid she would blurt out some secret, would criticize me in public. She always embarrassed me by telling everyone that I liked to lie in bed reading and wouldn't help her with the housework.

... eating at school out of sacks, hiding our "lonches" *papas con chorizo* behind cupped hands and bowed heads, gobbling them up before the other kids could see. Guilt lay folded in the tortilla. The Anglo kids laughing – calling us "tortilleros," the Mexican kids taking up the word and using it as a club with which to hit each other. My brothers, sister and I started bringing white bread sandwiches to school. After a while we stopped taking our lunch altogether.

There is no beauty in poverty, in my mother being able to give only one of her children lunch money. (We all agreed it should go to Nune, he was growing fast and was always hungry.) It was not very romantic

for my sister and me to wear the dresses and panties my mother made us out of flour sacks because she couldn't afford store-bought ones like the other mothers.

Well, I'm not ashamed of you anymore, Momma.

My heart, once bent and cracked, once  
ashamed of your China ways.

Ma, hear me now, tell me your story  
again and again.

(Nellie Wong, "From a Heart of Rice Straw,"  
*Dreams of Harrison Railroad Park*)

It was not my mother's fault that we were poor and yet so much of my pain and shame has been with our both betraying each other. But my mother has always been there for me in spite of our differences and emotional gulfs. She has never stopped fighting; she is a survivor. Even now I can hear her arguing with my father over how to raise us, insisting that all decisions be made by both of them. I can hear her crying over the body of my dead father. She was 28, had had little schooling, was unskilled, yet her strength was greater than most men's, raising us single-handed.

After my father died, I worked in the fields every weekend and every summer, even when I was a student in college. (We only migrated once when I was seven, journeyed in the back of my father's red truck with two other families to the cotton fields of west Texas. When I missed a few weeks of school, my father decided this should not happen again.)

...the planes swooping down on us, the fifty or a hundred of us falling onto the ground, the cloud of insecticide lacerating our eyes, clogging our nostrils. Nor did the corporate farm owners care that there were no toilets in the wide open fields, no bushes to hide behind.

Over the years, the confines of farm and ranch life began to chafe. The traditional role of la mujer was a saddle I did not want to wear. The concepts "passive" and "dutiful" raked my skin like spurs and "marriage" and "children" set me to bucking faster than rattlesnakes or coyotes. I took to wearing boots and men's jeans and walking about with my head full of visions, hungry for more words and more words. Slowly I unbowed my head, refused my estate and began to challenge the way things were. But it's taken over thirty years to unlearn the belief instilled in me that white is better than brown – something that some people of color *never* will unlearn. And it is only now that the hatred of myself, which I spent the greater part of my adolescence cultivating, is turning to love.

## La Muerte, the Frozen Snow Queen

*I dig a grave, bury my first love, a German Shepherd. Bury the second, third, and fourth dog. The last one retching in the backyard, going into convulsions from insecticide poisoning. I buried him beside the others, five mounds in a row crowned with crosses I'd fashioned from twigs.*

*No more pets, no more loves—I court death now.*

. . . Two years ago on a fine November day in Yosemite Park, I fall on the floor with cramps, severe chills and shaking that go into spasms and near convulsions, then fevers so high my eyes feel like eggs frying. Twelve hours of this. I tell everyone "It's nothing, don't worry, I'm alright." The first four gynecologists advise a hysterectomy. The fifth, a woman, says wait.

. . . Last March my fibroids conspired with an intestinal tract infection and spawned watermelons in my uterus. The doctor played with his knife. La Chingada ripped open, raped with the white man's wand. My soul in one corner of the hospital ceiling, getting thinner and thinner telling me to clean up my shit, to release the fears and garbage from the past that are hanging me up. So I take La Muerte's scythe and cut away my arrogance and pride, the emotional depressions I indulge in, the head trips I do on myself and other people. With her scythe I cut the umbilical cord shackling me to the past and to friends and attitudes that drag me down. Strip away – all the way to the bone. Make myself utterly vulnerable.

. . . I can't sleep nights. The mugger said he would come and get me. There was a break in the county jail and I just know he is broken out and is coming to get me because I picked up a big rock and chased him, because I got help and caught him. How *dare* he drag me over rocks and twigs, the skin on my knees peeling, how *dare* he lay his hands on my throat, how *dare* he try to choke me to death, how *dare* he try to push me off the bridge to splatter my blood and bones on the rocks 20 feet below. His breath on my face, our eyes only inches apart, our bodies rolling on the ground in an embrace so intimate we could have been mistaken for lovers.

That night terror found me curled up in my bed. I couldn't stop trembling. For months terror came to me at night and never left me. And even now, seven years later, when I'm out in the street after dark and I hear running footsteps behind me, terror finds me again and again.

*No more pets, no more loves.*

. . . one of my lovers saying I was frigid when he couldn't bring me to orgasm.

. . . bringing home my Peruvian boyfriend and my mother saying she did not want her "Prieta" to have a "mojado" (wetback) for a lover.

...my mother and brothers calling me puta when I told them I had lost my virginity and that I'd done it on purpose. My mother and brothers calling me *jota* (queer) when I told them my friends were gay men and lesbians.

...Randy saying, "It's time you stopped being a nun, an ice queen afraid of living." But I did not want to be a snow queen regal with icy smiles and fingernails that ripped her prey ruthlessly. And yet, I knew my being distant, remote, a mountain sleeping under the snow, is what attracted him.

A woman lies buried under me,  
interred for centuries, presumed dead.

A woman lies buried under me.  
I hear her soft whisper  
the rasp of her parchment skin  
fighting the folds of her shroud.  
Her eyes are pierced by needles  
her eyelids, two fluttering moths.\*

I am always surprised by the image that my white and non-Chicano friends have of me, surprised at how much they *do not* know me, at how I do not allow them to know me. They have substituted the negative picture the white culture has painted of my race with a highly romanticized, idealized image. "You're strong," my friends said, "a mountain of strength."

Though the power may be real, the mythic qualities attached to it keep others from dealing with me as a person and rob me of my being able to act out my other selves. Having this "power" doesn't exempt me from being prey in the streets nor does it make my scrambling to survive, to feed myself, easier. To cope with hurt and control my fears, I grew a thick skin. Oh, the many names of power – pride, arrogance, control. I am not the frozen snow queen but a flesh and blood woman with perhaps too loving a heart, one easily hurt.

*I'm not invincible, I tell you. My skin's as fragile as a baby's I'm brittle bones and human, I tell you. I'm a broken arm.*

*You're a razor's edge, you tell me. Shock them shitless. Be the holocaust. Be the black Kali. Spit in their eye and never cry. Oh broken angel, throw away your cast, mend your wing. Be not a rock but a razor's edge and burn with falling.* – Journal Entry, Summer Solstice, 1978.

\*From "A Woman Lies Buried Under Me"

## Who Are My People

I am a wind-swayed bridge, a crossroads inhabited by whirlwinds. Gloria, the facilitator, Gloria the mediator, straddling the walls between abysses. "Your allegiance is to La Raza, the Chicano movement," say the members of my race. "Your allegiance is to the Third World," say my Black and Asian friends. "Your allegiance is to your gender, to women," say the feminists. Then there's my allegiance to the Gay movement, to the socialist revolution, to the New Age, to magic and the occult. And there's my affinity to literature, to the world of the artist. What am I? *A third world lesbian feminist with Marxist and mystic leanings.* They would chop me up into little fragments and tag each piece with a label.

You say my name is ambivalence? Think of me as Shiva, a many-armed and legged body with one foot on brown soil, one on white, one in straight society, one in the gay world, the man's world, the women's, one limb in the literary world, another in the working class, the socialist, and the occult worlds. A sort of spider woman hanging by one thin strand of web.

Who, me confused? Ambivalent? Not so. Only your labels split me.

Years ago, a roommate of mine fighting for gay rights told MAYO, a Chicano organization, that she and the president were gay. They were ostracized. When they left, MAYO fell apart. They too, being forced to choose between the priorities of race, sexual preference, or gender.

In the streets of this gay mecca, San Francisco, a Black man at a bus stop yells "Hey Faggots, come suck my cock." Randy yells back "You goddamn nigger, I worked in the Civil Rights movement ten years so you could call me names." Guilt gagging in his throat with the word, nigger....a white woman waiting for the J-Church streetcar sees Randy and David kissing and says "You should be ashamed of yourselves. Two grown men—disgusting."

...Randy and David running into the house. The hair on the back of my neck rises, something in their voices triggers fear in me. Three Latino men in a car had chased them as they were walking home from work. "Gay boys, faggots," they yelled throwing a beer bottle. Getting out of their car, knife blades reflect the full moon....Randy and David hitting each other in the hall. Thuds on the wall—the heavy animal sounds.

...Randy pounding on my door one corner of his mouth bleeding, his glasses broken, blind without them, he crying "I'm going to kill him, I'm going to kill the son of a bitch."

*The violence against us, the violence within us*, aroused like a rabid dog. Adrenaline-filled bodies, we bring home the anger and the violence

we meet on the street and turn it against each other. We sic the rabid dog on each other and on ourselves. The black moods of alienation descend, the bridges we've extended out to each other crumble. We put the walls back up between us.

Once again it's faggot-hunting and queer-baiting time in the city. "And on your first anniversary of loving each other," I say to Randy, "and they had to be Latinos," feeling guilt when I look at David. Who is my brother's keeper, I wonder – knowing I have to be, we all have to be. We are all responsible. But who exactly *are* my people?

*I identify as a woman. Whatever insults women insults me.*

*I identify as gay. Whoever insults gays insults me.*

*I identify as feminist. Whoever slurs feminism slurs me.*

That which is insulted I take as part of me, but there is something too simple about this kind of thinking. Part of the dialectic is missing. What about what I do not identify as?

I have been terrified of writing this essay because I will have to own up to the fact that I do not exclude whites from the list of people I love, two of them happen to be gay males. For the politically correct stance we let color, class, and gender separate us from those who would be kindred spirits. So the walls grow higher, the gulfs between us wider, the silences more profound. There is an enormous contradiction in being a bridge.

### Dance To the Beat of Radical Colored Chic

This task – to be a bridge, to be a fucking crossroads for goddess' sake.

During my stint in the Feminist Writers' Guild many white members would ask me why Third World women do not come to FWG meetings and readings. I should have answered, "Because their skins are not as thick as mine, because their fear of encountering racism is greater than mine. They don't enjoy being put down, ignored, not engaged in equal dialogue, being tokens. And, neither do I." Oh, I know, women of color are hot right now and hip. Our afro-rhythms and latin salsas, the beat of our drums is in. White women flock to our parties, dance to the beat of radical colored chic. They come to our readings, take up our cause. I have no objections to this. What I mind is the pseudo-liberal ones who suffer from the white women's burden. Like the monkey in the Sufi story, who upon seeing a fish in the water rushes to rescue it from drowning by carrying it up into the branches of a tree. She takes a missionary role. She attempts to talk *for us* – what a presumption! This act is a rape of our tongue and our acquiescence is a complicity to that rape. We women of color have to stop being modern medusas – throats cut, silenced into a mere hissing.

## Where Do We Hang The Blame

*The pull between what is and what should be.*

Does the root of the sickness lie within ourselves or within our patriarchal institutions? Did our institutions birth and propagate themselves and are we merely their pawns? Do ideas originate in human minds or do they exist in a "no-osphere," a limbo space where ideas originate without our help? Where do we hang the blame for the sickness we see around us – around our own heads or around the throat of "capitalism," "socialism," "men," "white culture"?

If we do not create these institutions, we certainly perpetuate them through our inadvertent support. What lessons do we learn from the mugger?

Certainly racism is not just a white phenomenon. Whites are the top dogs and they shit on the rest of us every day of our lives. But casting stones is not the solution. Do we hand the oppressor/thug the rocks he throws at us? How often do we people of color place our necks on the chopping block? What are the ways we hold out our wrists to be shackled? Do we gag our own mouths with our "dios lo manda" resignation? How many times before the cock crows do we deny ourselves, shake off our dreams, and trample them into the sand? How many times do we fail to help one another up from the bottom of the stairs? How many times have we let someone else carry our crosses? How still do we stand to be crucified?

It is difficult for me to break free of the Chicano cultural bias into which I was born and raised, and the cultural bias of the Anglo culture that I was brainwashed into adopting. It is easier to repeat the racial patterns and attitudes, especially those of fear and prejudice, that we have inherited than to resist them.

Like a favorite old shoe that no longer fits we do not let go of our comfortable old selves so that the new self can be worn. We fear our power, fear our feminine selves, fear the strong woman within, especially the black Kali aspect, dark and awesome. Thus we pay homage not to the power inside us but to the power outside us, masculine power, external power.

I see Third World peoples and women not as oppressors but as accomplices to oppression by our unwittingly passing on to our children and our friends the oppressor's ideologies. I cannot discount the role I play as accomplice, that we all play as accomplices, for we are not screaming loud enough in protest.

The disease of powerlessness thrives in my body, not just out there in society. And just as the use of gloves, masks, and disinfectants fails

to kill this disease, government grants, equal rights opportunity programs, welfare, and foodstamps fail to uproot racism, sexism, and homophobia. And tokenism is not the answer. Sharing the pie is not going to work. I had a bite of it once and it almost poisoned me. With mutations of the virus such as these, one cannot isolate the virus and treat it. The whole organism is poisoned.

I stand behind whatever threatens our oppression. I stand behind whatever breaks us out of our bonds, short of killing and maiming. I stand with whatever and whoever breaks us out of our limited views and awakens our atrophied potentials.

How to turn away from the hellish journey that the disease has put me through, the alchemical nights of the soul. Torn limb from limb, knifed, mugged, beaten. My tongue (Spanish) ripped from my mouth, left voiceless. My name stolen from me. My bowels fucked with a surgeon's knife, uterus and ovaries pitched into the trash. Castrated. Set apart from my own kind, isolated. My life-blood sucked out of me by my role as woman nurturer – the last form of cannibalism.

### **El Mundo Zurdo (the Left-handed World)\***

*The pull between what is and what should be.* I believe that by changing ourselves we change the world, that traveling El Mundo Zurdo path is the path of a two-way movement – a going deep into the self and an expanding out into the world, a simultaneous recreation of the self and a reconstruction of society. And yet, I am confused as to how to accomplish this.

I can't discount the fact of the thousands that go to bed hungry every night. The thousands that do numbing shitwork eight hours a day each day of their lives. The thousands that get beaten and killed every day. The millions of women who have been burned at the stake, the millions who have been raped. Where is the justice to this?

I can't reconcile the sight of a battered child with the belief that we choose what happens to us, that we create our own world. *I cannot resolve this in myself.* I don't know. I can only speculate, try to integrate the experiences that I've had or have been witness to and try to make some sense of why we do violence to each other. In short, I'm trying to create a religion not out there somewhere, but in my gut. I am trying to make peace between what has happened to me, what the world is, and what it should be.

*"Growing up I felt that I was an alien from another planet dropped on my mother's lap. But for what purpose?"*

\*This section consists of notes "Toward a Construction of El Mundo Zurdo," an essay in progress.

The mixture of bloods and affinities, rather than confusing or unbalancing me, has forced me to achieve a kind of equilibrium. Both cultures deny me a place in *their* universe. Between them and among others, I build my own universe, *El Mundo Zurdo*. I belong to myself and not to any one people.

I walk the tightrope with ease and grace. I span abysses. Blindfolded in the blue air. The sword between my thighs, the blade warm with my flesh. I walk the rope – an acrobat in equipoise, expert at the Balancing Act.

The rational, the patriarchal, and the heterosexual have held sway and legal tender for too long. Third World women, lesbians, feminists, and feminist-oriented men of all colors are banding and bonding together to right that balance. Only *together* can we be a force. I see us as a network of kindred spirits, a kind of family.

We are the queer groups, the people that don't belong anywhere, not in the dominant world nor completely within our own respective cultures. Combined we cover so many oppressions. But the overwhelming oppression is the collective fact that we do not fit, and because we do not fit *we are a threat*. Not all of us have the same oppressions, but we empathize and identify with each other's oppressions. We do not have the same ideology, nor do we derive similar solutions. Some of us are leftists, some of us practitioners of magic. Some of us are both. But these different affinities are not opposed to each other. In *El Mundo Zurdo* I with my own affinities and my people with theirs can live together and transform the planet.